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Steam, Cannon and Wires

The Royal Navy and British Imperialism in Northeastern Africa, 1799-1899

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Steam, Cannon, and Wires:
The Royal Navy and British Imperialism in Northeastern
Africa, 1799-1899

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The following dissertation examines to what extent naval strategy motivated the expansion of the British Empire into the territories surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden during the nineteenth century. The Red Sea waterway was of immense strategic importance to Britain as it opened a new route to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the traditional way station and naval base at the Cape of Good Hope – even more so after the proliferation of the steamship and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. In spite of this, no previous work has analysed the underlying causes of British imperialism the region surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Within the past few years, a handful of scholars have recognised the significant gap in the historical literature pertaining to the Red Sea, and several recent works have examined aspects of the sea’s history. In seeking to understand the dynamics of British imperialism in the Red Sea region, this thesis has analysed the expansion of empire from an oceanic and naval perspective. A close examination of British government records makes clear that a perceived need to uphold the Royal Navy’s dominance in the Red Sea as part of a wider imperial defence strategy resulted in first the annexation of islands and ports, and then the extension of British rule over the continental interior.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, British policymakers became increasingly concerned with protecting the sea lines of communication linking the Empire. The Red Sea was not only one of the most important shipping links between Britain and the eastern Empire, but also the spine of the primary imperial communications network from England to India. Hence, as this thesis shows, the collapse of powerful native states in northeastern Africa in the 1880s forced the British to pre-emptively seize ports and territory in the name of imperial defence. Preventing colonial rivals from threatening the Royal Navy’s control over the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden therefore became one of the prime motivators behind the projection of British imperial power into northeastern Africa.

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Introduction

Historically, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have formed a highway linking Europe, Africa, and Asia. During the nineteenth century, the waterway became one of the British Empire's principal sea lines of communication, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Although an often-overlooked area, the territories surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden were subject to a scramble for territory by Britain and other European colonial powers. Despite lacking any significant resources or potential captive markets, the Red Sea region became the subject of several military interventions, naval deployments, and, eventually, the establishment of numerous European colonies and protectorates.

This thesis examines the role played by strategic needs of a global maritime empire in the expansion of the British Empire in northeastern Africa over the course of the nineteenth century. Prior to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Britain's imperial possessions in and around the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden were limited to Aden itself and the small, uninhabited island of Perim. However, over the following three decades Britain steadily extended direct rule over significant sections of territory in the Red Sea region, climaxing with the annexation of Sudan in 1899. The following thesis explores the question whether these imperial acquisitions between 1870 and 1900 were linked or motivated by a common theme.

In fact, the evidence suggests that British attempts to craft an Empire-wide global defence system, and subsequent competition with maritime rivals in the Red Sea, led to the formation of colonial states in northeastern Africa, including present-day Sudan, Eritrea, Somaliland, Djibouti, and Kenya. In short, when faced with the threat of losing control over a waterway deemed vital for imperial strategic interests, the British resorted to seizing and fortifying local ports and then absorbing the surrounding hinterlands. In a pattern repeated throughout the nineteenth-century,

the British Empire gradually expanded its hold over this part of the African interior in order to deny potentially significant strategic bases to rival powers.

The importance of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for Britain in the latter half of the nineteenth century is difficult to overstate, as the waterway became the Empire's most important artery for both transport and communications. For the British Empire, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden became the new central axis, around which developed a global, imperial maritime state, or what John Darwin has termed, the British 'world system'.¹ With the drastic reduction in travelling time between Britain and the imperial territories in Asia and Australasia, the advent of the steamship, and the laying of an all-red telegraph line along the bottom of the Red Sea from London to Bombay to Sydney, the Empire was changed by the opening of the canal from a collection of eighteenth century settler colonies into something more resembling an integrated, global network. So important to the Empire's shipping and communications did the Suez route ultimately become, that between 1869 and 1899 British strategists repeatedly clamoured for more ships and troops to be dispatched to the Red Sea theatre.

As this thesis will demonstrate, efforts to secure maritime mastery over the Suez route led Britain to rely on a series of expedients to ensure that no peer competitor could challenge the Royal Navy in the Red Sea, including pre-emptive territorial annexations. As a result, by the end of the century Britain had amassed a huge swathe of territory in order to secure the dominance of the Royal Navy in the waterway.

The study begins in 1799, the date when, in reaction to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, Britain first attempted to acquire territory in the region in the name of imperial security. Prior to the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, the Red Sea was something of a blank spot on the map, visited only intermittently by European warships and traders.² This was in part a reflection of the difficulties

¹ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Charles Beke, *The French and English in the Red Sea* (London: Taylor Francis, 1862), 27.

in navigating the Red Sea, which for sailing ships was and is slow and difficult due to prevailing winds and currents. What is more, the principal ports along the sea were small, economically underdeveloped, and lacking in docking or repair facilities for large ships.³ The coasts lined with shallow, razor-sharp reefs and the central channel dotted with small islands and submerged rocks, the Red Sea offered little to European navigators prior to the French invasion of Egypt.⁴

Even after the establishment of regular steam services in the 1830s, transiting through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden remained a significant challenge. The lack of accurate charts and of lighthouses led to numerous accidents, including a notorious case in 1869 when a civilian steamer, the SS *Carnatic*, ran aground on an unmarked reef, taking 31 passengers and £40,000 in gold to bottom.⁵ Even as late as the 1890s, official guidebooks were filled with dire warnings about the frequent dust storms which sweep across the Red Sea, and the searing summer temperatures which were believed to be hazardous to the health of passengers and crew.⁶ The combination of uncharted waters, contrary wind patterns, and a dangerous climate all made transit through the Red Sea risky for European sailing ships, and it is therefore no coincidence that growing British interest in the sea coincided with the advent of the steamship and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Politically, for most of the nineteenth century, the Red Sea was in theory an Ottoman lake. Both the eastern and western shores of the sea and the Gulf of Aden were nominally imperial dependencies. The Arabian coastline was administered directly as part of the Ottoman Empire, and the tribes of the Hadramaut coast, modern-day Yemen and Oman, swore allegiance to the sultan as the Caliph of Islam.⁷ The African shores were controlled by self-governing Ottoman Egypt, under

³ H.D. Jenkins, *Instructions for Sailing Through the Suez Canal with Notes on the Navigation of the Gulf of Suez & Red Sea*, 2nd ed., (London: E. James Imray & Son, 1893).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Secretary of the Peninsular and Oriental Company, 'The Loss of the Carnatic (S.S.),' *The Times*, 28 September 1869.

⁶ Jenkins, *Instructions for Sailing Through the Suez Canal with Notes on the Navigation of the Gulf of Suez & Red Sea*, 23.

⁷ Robert Walter Canning Large, 'The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905', (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, 1974), 3.2

whose ambitious ruler, the Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), endeavoured to build a vast African dominion including the entire coastline from Suez to Cape Guardafui.⁸ Consequently, for reasons of both natural and political geography, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden remained largely free from the attention of European governments until the 1860s. This would only change with the opening of the Suez Canal and the introduction of steam-powered gunboats, which enabled the creation of a new arena for imperial expansion for the powers, jostling for position along the shores of the Red Sea.

As a result, by the end of the century the regional map had been dramatically redrawn. Britain, the paramount imperial power and with the most at stake, had acquired a huge arc of territory stretching from Alexandria to Mombasa, and had declared protectorates over Yemen and Somaliland. France and Italy too had conquered colonies, making landfall at ports in the Red Sea and the Gulf and marching inland. By 1899, Sudan, the last truly independent state in northeastern Africa (with the exception of Ethiopia) was annexed to the British Empire by Lord Kitchener. The acquisition of fortified ports and the stationing of a squadron of gunboats in the Red Sea made the Royal Navy's domination of the waterway complete. So complete, in fact, that one French visitor writing at the end of the century went as far as to describe the sea as an 'Imperial Piccadilly'.⁹ 1899 is therefore a natural closing point for this study, the year that the last piece of northeastern Africa was subsumed into Britain's imperial world-state and the year that Britain went to war in South Africa to secure its hold over the Cape of Good Hope.

⁸ MW Daly and PM Holt, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, 5th edition (Harlow: Longman Publishing, 2000), 41.

⁹ Valeksa Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migrations and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 57.

Methodology

The following thesis examines British imperialism in the waterway comprised of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and the territories surrounding them. Although recognising that the waterway is, in its purest geographical sense, an extremity of the Indian Ocean, it is nevertheless treated as a distinct oceanic region for the purposes of this research. Whilst part of a wider body of water, the region's unique geography and the interconnectedness of the human and natural features surrounding the waterway support the consideration of the region as worthy of study in its own right. It also differs inherently from the rest of the Indian Ocean in that it is a narrow, confined passageway easily intercepted or blocked at its many narrow chokepoints. Unlike the relative freedom of movement in the Indian Ocean, the seaway between Suez and Aden is sharply defined by the extensive reefs, islands, and straits which line the Red Sea's coasts. The sea also stands apart from the Indian Ocean's other extended branches on account of its length, narrowness and its connection to another major body of water. Indeed, the formation of a Red Sea division by the Royal Navy and the Foreign Office's view of Red Sea and the Somali coast as separate zones of responsibility from the Indian Ocean support the idea of examining the sea in and of itself.¹⁰

Moreover, examined as a waterway distinct from the wider category of the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea has proven to be useful as a case study of British maritime-based imperialism in East Africa in the late nineteenth century. Given the wealth of previous research dedicated specifically to similar sub-seas such as the Aegean or the Persian Gulf, the following work fits into a broader tradition of oceanic history.

¹⁰ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast. Government of India Foreign Department to Lord Salisbury, letter, 29 January 1875.

In order to uncover the motivations behind British imperial expansion in the Red Sea region, the project has made use of the records, both official and unofficial, of the departments most closely associated with naval strategy and imperialism in northeastern Africa over the nineteenth century. These include the Admiralty, the War Office, the Foreign Office, the India Office, the Colonial Office, and associated files and records left by key figures in those offices, including Secretaries of State as well as ranking civil servants. The records accessed in order to gain the fullest available picture of the situation facing contemporary policymakers were categorically examined based on the filing system developed as part of the archival process and were limited to those published between 1799 and 1899, or pertaining to relevant events between those dates.

Records left by naval officers deployed to the region have also been consulted to get an understanding of the evolving maritime environment in the Red Sea over the course of the century. The records, primarily held by the National Maritime Museum's Caird Library as well as in collections of family papers stored in other archives, were identified by searching on the UK's national integrated records check for the names of senior officers aboard all naval vessels recorded as being deployed to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden during relevant periods. Similarly, intelligence reports about local crises and the emergence of new threats to British interests generated by the British Army for the War Office and by local political officers for the Foreign Office were examined as they formed the primary sources of information for decisionmakers in Westminster. Correspondence between the British political resident in Aden and the regional government in Bombay in particular provides a valuable source of information on the strategic situation in and around the mouth of the Red Sea at the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

In addition to government records, the following research has also drawn from the works of the period's pre-eminent strategic thinkers. These men formed the intellectual vanguard of Britain's evolving grand strategy and formed the wider frame of reference in which statesmen decided to deploy ships and seize strategic territory as part of an attempt to preserve Britain's status as a

leading global power. In addition to their published works, their private papers have also been examined to establish the degree to which their ideas were transmitted to the governing class and under what circumstances they did so.

By bringing together material typically consulted separately within different sub-fields of British imperial and military history, this thesis uses new material to bring a fresh perspective to the study of Victorian imperialism in Africa. Building on the work of the historians of imperialism as well as of the Royal Navy and of strategic intellectualism alike, this study underlines the strategic ambition of late Victorian strategists to mobilise and defend the Empire in its entirety. From the available evidence, the preservation Britain's status as a Great Power in the face of rising industrial and military competition from the US, Germany, and Russia emerges as a key theme in the growth of the British Empire in northeastern Africa.

Historiography

The Scramble for Africa remains one of the most extensively researched topics in European and global history. In the British tradition of historiography, a wide variety of explanations behind the sudden, explosive growth of imperial expansion has pointed to a range of factors including domestic policy, geo-strategic concerns, the global financial system overseen by the City of London, and by the influence of men on the spot, amongst others. However, as John Springhall remarked in his 1986 review of Norman Etherington's work, 'what the study of British imperialism needs is not further sets of essays reworking tired formulas but the exploration of new areas for research: the critical links between domestic politics and colonial wars, the study of the historical sociology of colonial bureaucracies, the role of the military in promoting "forward polices"'.¹¹

¹¹ John Springhall, 'Reviewed Works: British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century by C. C. Eldridge; Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital by Norman Etherington', *Victorian Studies* 29:4 (1986): 634.

The following thesis does not aim to establish another theory of imperialism. Rather, it seeks to focus exclusively on the expansion of British imperial power in a unique part of the African continent, one which, due perhaps to the lack of large-scale conflicts or of lucrative commodities, has largely escaped the attention of scholars studying the partition of Africa. In so doing, it builds on the research previously conducted on the origins of British imperialism in Africa, particularly that done on the occupation of Egypt and the wars in Sudan. It also draws considerable inspiration from the existing literature on the development of a defence strategy for the British Empire driven primarily by navalists in the metropolitan core. By bringing together, synthesising, and expanding upon previous work conducted on the Royal Navy and the Empire in Africa as a whole and applying it to this specific region, the project aims to highlight how the pursuit of a global British defence strategy led to the annexation of territory along the coastlines of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Studies and Theories of Imperialism

As noted above, the scholarship done on British imperialism in the nineteenth century generally, and on the Scramble for Africa specifically, is one of the most extensive in the field. Attempts by scholars to identify the theoretical underpinnings of late Victorian imperialism and to explain the partition of Africa have resulted in a significant body of work dedicated to the expansion of British imperial power into Africa in the late nineteenth century. Dominated originally by Marxist historians and then between the 1950s and 1980s by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, the historiography of the British Empire in Africa has identified a comprehensive range of possible motivations behind British imperialism on the continent.

One of the first historians to do so was John Hobson, whose 1902 polemic *Imperialism: A Study* introduced the first theory of imperialism. A socialist writing in the wake of the South African War, Hobson identified capitalism as the root cause of European imperialism. In attempting to explain how Britain had acquired a vast empire in Africa, Hobson blamed 'the investor who cannot

find at home the profitable use he seeks for his capital, and [who] insists that his Government should help him to profitable and secure investments abroad.'¹² In Hobson's economic theory of imperialism, the overproduction of goods at home and the need to continually invest profits led capitalists to push for expansion into 'uncivilized' continents in the drive to acquire captive markets and consumers.

Although the impact of Hobson's work was not immediately felt when it was first published,¹³ *Imperialism* was nevertheless the beginning of the development of a general Marxist interpretation of imperialism which increasingly gained traction throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, it influenced Lenin, who drew much inspiration from Hobson when he wrote *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* in 1916. Writing in the midst of the bitter conflict between the imperial powers during the First World War, Lenin suggested that imperialism had been caused by 'monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination..., the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful.'¹⁴ Lenin argued that capitalist governments seized colonies in order to hold them as monopolies for investment, ensuring future conflict as they competed with each other to capture territory to provide markets for their domestic corporations. War necessarily followed, as entire world became divided amongst the rival Powers.

This Marxist perspective remained the predominant theoretical explanation for imperialism until after the Second World War, albeit with the exception of the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter who in 1919 suggested that there was a sociological explanation for the rise of empires, driven by warrior castes and social elites. Nevertheless, it was not until 1953 when John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson published their article 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' in *The Economic History Review* that any rival theory of imperialism was suggested.¹⁵ Developed more fully in their 1961

¹² John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1902), 130.

¹³ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁴ Vladimir Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin: "What is to be Done?" and other Writings*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Dover, 1987), 267.

¹⁵ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade,' *The Economic History Review* 6:1 (1953), 1.

book *Africa and the Victorians*, Robinson and Gallagher focused on the geopolitical underpinnings of imperialism in the late nineteenth century in response to peripheral crises to explain the rise of New Imperialism, with a particular emphasis on Britain's efforts to secure the shipping line to India. For them, imperialism in Africa was nothing more than a 'defensive reaction' to local uprisings which threatened to uproot British positions along the shipping line to India, such as the Cape Colony and Egypt. Imperialism was therefore 'not so much the cause as the effect of the African partition.'¹⁶ Broadly speaking, the Robinson and Gallagher thesis portrayed a dynamically expanding Victorian Britain and a succession of governments which preferred to project influence informally due to lower costs. The switch from informal dominance to formal political control was a tactical decision made in response to particular circumstances, and only carried out in defence of perceived interests.

The catalyst for British imperialism in Africa, argued Robinson and Gallagher in subsequent publications, was the downfall of traditional powers on the continent, sparking internal crises to which the British were compelled to react. 'It was the fall of an old power in its north, the rise of a new in its south' which prompted otherwise reluctant statesmen in Britain, as well as other European powers, to become embroiled in Africa.¹⁷ In northeastern Africa, the two identified Britain's reaction to the collapse of the Egyptian government between 1879 and 1882 as the key moment in which Britain, by occupying the country in order to guarantee the security of the Suez Canal, fired the starting pistol for imperial expansion into Africa. In the struggle to prevent a vengeful France from staking unlimited territorial claims throughout the continent and to secure German support, Robinson and Gallagher argued that the occupation of Egypt forced Britain to both sanction and participate in a cycle of claims, counter-claims and territorial expansion.¹⁸ Britain's grip on Egypt became all the more crucial as the Franco-Russian entente of 1891 threatened to

¹⁶ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 161.

¹⁷ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Partition of Africa', in *The Decline, Revival, and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and Other Essays*, ed. John Gallagher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

overpower British strategic interests in the Mediterranean, forcing London to commit to a policy of securing the entire Nile Valley in order to retain Egypt proper and the Delta.¹⁹

Robinson and Gallagher's work marked the beginning of a new, strategic approach to the study of imperialism in Africa and it fundamentally revolved around the concept of crises on the periphery. Moreover, as later observed by Robinson, the internal crises suffered by native states in Africa and Asia were often caused by the aggressive promotion of European economic liberalism.²⁰ Whilst embraced by some governing, collaborative elites, the driving of European *laissez-faire* policies and technological innovations fatally undermined local societies, leading to backlash and internal strife. The breakdown of constitutional order and traditional authority, argued Robinson, forced the imperial powers to intervene more directly by assuming direct political control. In the case of the British in Egypt, for example, the collapse of the indigenous, pro-British regime served as the catalyst for the British occupation of Cairo and of the Suez Canal. In addition its fresh perspective on Victorian imperialism, the Robinson and Gallagher thesis also underlined the fact that imperial expansion was costly and was only undertaken when believed necessary and in the most economical manner possible.

Robinson's theory of collaboration was rejected in a subsequent essay authored by AE Atmore in 1984, in which Atmore noted that it was not the policy of conquered states to cooperate with the Western powers to their own detriment. As an example, he noted the Ottoman Empire's attempts to modernise and to attract Western capital in the late nineteenth century, measures undertaken by the Ottomans themselves with a view to strengthening the economy.²¹ Indeed, as Atmore further argued, the colonial empires were not held so much by local cooperation as by brute military force in the form of the small, but highly capable, colonial constabulary. The pressures of

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,' *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen & Bob Sutcliffe (London: Longman Group, 1972), 118.

²¹ AE Atmore, 'The Extra-European Foundations of British Imperialism: Towards a Reassessment', in *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. CC Eldridge (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1984), 113.

domestic politics, the racist ideology of Victorian Europeans and the supposed need for prestige and might also played key roles in motivating foreign conquests.

Atmore's essay notwithstanding, however, the first comprehensive alternative to the 'R&G' thesis came with the advent of Peter Cain's and Antony Hopkins' concept of 'gentlemanly capitalism' first introduced in 1986. Whilst noting that 'so much has been written on [the partition] on behalf of so many competing theories', their work effectively placed the financial interests of the City of London and the new class of bankers and financial entrepreneurs at the heart of British imperialism.²² Commercial interests, not industrial, controlled by a class of southern bankers and financial engineers were the true engines behind the British government's embrace of formal imperialism in the late nineteenth century.

According to Cain and Hopkins, this gentlemanly class held as articles of faith the sanctity of unfettered free trade, of financial contract, the liberalising power of economic development and compound interest, and prized the means of securing these interests – the telegraph, the railway, the steamship, and the Royal Navy.²³ By reinterpreting the Empire as an expression of gentlemanly capitalism, Cain and Hopkins criticised the notion that crises on the rim of Britain's imperial periphery drove imperial expansion, arguing that Robinson's and Gallagher's approach was to 'report the symptoms, not to diagnose the cause' of imperialism.²⁴ For Cain and Hopkins, the root cause of imperialism in Africa was to be found in the domestic politics and social hierarchy of Victorian Britain. Their work depicted the Victorian view of Africa as first a continent in need of liberalisation for the purposes of trade and Christianity, and following the Arabi revolt in Egypt, as a danger to the international financial order established by the City if left independent.²⁵ Noting the intertwining of Parliament and the City, and the British government's subsequent intolerance of

²² P.J. Cain, A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688 – 2015* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006 edn.), 330.

²³ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 343.

financial misconduct, Cain and Hopkins highlighted Whitehall's desire to secure its significant financial interests in Egypt during the intervention in 1882 and the lack of documentary evidence suggesting the intervention was launched over the issue of the Suez Canal.²⁶

Importantly, Cain and Hopkins also underlined the growing economic integration of the Empire which took place after the awarding of self-government to the colonies of settlement, beginning with Canada in 1867. This imperial trading bloc, which was dependent upon the Empire's maritime trading and communication links, was nurtured and supported by the City's banking sector. In that sense, this thesis draws upon the arguments of both Robinson and Gallagher as well as Cain and Hopkins. Whilst the documentary evidence does indeed suggest that British military thinkers successfully advocated for the expansion of the Empire into northeastern Africa, as this thesis will demonstrate, they did so due to a growing conviction in the idea of imperial defence, which was proffered as a panacea to Britain's impending eclipse by other rivals. Imperial defence was very much driven by a domestic concern of decline and was closely related to the imperial federation movement, and the annexation of territory surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden was invariably justified on these grounds.

Cain and Hopkins have had their challengers and detractors, however. In her exploration of British foreign policy during the late Victorian period, Sneh Mahajan argued that the Conservative manifesto of 1874 led to an orienting of foreign policy around India. Leading military officers of the Forward school on the Indian northwestern frontier were appointed to key positions in relevant government departments and to distant colonial stations – conscious decisions, Mahajan notes, which were made knowing they would lead to imperial expansion.²⁷ Moreover, far from being sympathetic to or members of a class of City bankers, the members of Gladstone's Liberal

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sneh Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy 1874-1914* (London: Routledge, 2002), 56.

government were portrayed by Mahajan as enthusiastic imperialists as the Conservatives, having apparently since 1877 planned to annex Egypt in the name of 'the national interest'.²⁸

Similarly, Ronald Hyam in his collection of essays *Understanding the British Empire*, sought to de-emphasise the all-pervasive influence of finance and economics as established by Cain and Hopkins, arguing that the British government adhered to *laissez-faire* economics and that the role of the 'gentlemanly capitalists' was overstated by his two colleagues. Instead, Hyam successfully reintroduced both the role of strategy as well as other sociological factors into the conversation surrounding Victorian imperialism. For example, his exploration of British and French expansion in Africa contained useful analyses on the fear of militant Islam which hovered over the British and French governments during the Egyptian and Sudanese crises in the 1880s. Whilst arguing that Britain was forced to respond to aggressive territorial expansion by France, 'rivalries in Africa were not simply between Europeans...the partition of Africa was a device to contain or counteract the expansion of militant Islam, which the British as well as the French feared greatly.'²⁹

An overriding theme of Hyam's work has been to re-examine the relationship between the metropolitan core and the imperial periphery. No single institution, such as the City, drove forward entirely the expansion of the Empire, and that the men on the spot, including military and naval commanders, were instrumental in guiding British imperial policy. Hyam's rejection of Cains' and Hopkin's argument about the centrality of economics in the British partition of Africa is valuable in that it serves as a reminder that other factors, including geopolitical considerations, were important in leading to a series of decisions to annex territory on the continent. However, his assessment that imperialism in northeastern Africa was driven by a desire to contain a possible surge of militant Islam by containing the Mahdist rebellion to the Sudanese interior and by using naval power to turn the Red Sea into a moat between Africa and Arabia is not supported by the documentary evidence.

²⁸ Ibid., 71.

²⁹ Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100.

John Darwin's 'bridgehead' thesis also serves as a useful reminder of the role played by sub-imperialisms in the extension of the imperial frontiers. Arguing that the indirect form of imperialism represented the limits of European power during the mid-nineteenth century, Darwin notes that within violent, chaotic local political systems, sub-entities, such as the government of Bombay, were often decisive in extending imperial control over new territory.³⁰ This was particularly true where the government in London held little control over interest over bridgeheads – in the case of the Red Sea, Aden and Suakin, whose consuls constantly advocated for further expansion in the name of security.

The 'centrifugal' form of imperialism, one which exerted itself opportunistically in response to developing situations far beyond London's direct oversight, was the product, Darwin argued, of powerful, virtually independent polities within the Empire, such as India, which exerted its own imperial influence over neighbouring territories. Indeed, as more recent research undertaken by Thomas Metcalfe has demonstrated, Indian troops played a critical role in the expansion of the Empire into East Africa. With the agreement of the viceregal government in Calcutta, sepoy battalions were sent to Suakin, and the Somaliland and Swahili coasts and the settlement of Indian subjects in Kenya and Uganda.³¹ In that sense, sub-imperial units could be both simultaneously drivers of expansion as well as the facilitators of annexations planned and sanctioned by London.

Not only did Darwinian bridgeheads such as imperial India become essentially powers in their own right, equipped with foreign departments and independent armies, but they also helped to shape wider British policy in London itself. Darwin depicted the government in India, specifically in Bombay, as the prime motivator for much of British imperialism in the Indian Ocean. However, policies of annexation advocated by sub-imperial units were, in the case of the Red Sea, often adopted by the home government as official policy, despite initial resistance. Robert Blythe's study

³⁰ John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *The English Historical Review*, 112:447 (June 1997), 627.

³¹ Thomas Metcalfe, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 161.

on India's sub-empire, for example, found that Indian officials were initially responsible for subsuming both the island of Perim and Somaliland into the British sphere of influence, over the protests of the Cabinet in London.³² Indian officials were ultimately forced to concede to London's control over these key points, but having originally extended imperial influence over these areas, the Indian government was, according to Blythe, the progenitor of British imperialism in the Gulf of Aden. The Indian government remained acutely interested in the Egyptian territories surrounding the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and following the collapse of the Egyptian empire, was one of the staunchest advocates of expansion into the vacuum left by Cairo.

Although extensive, the existing literature on Victorian imperialism has so far failed to examine the Red Sea region specifically in any significant depth and no single theory can adequately explain why expansion occurred in the area within the time frame that it did. Robinson and Gallagher's points about crises on the imperial periphery are applicable to the region in the 1880s, as will be discussed, but the extension of control over the littoral was done patently without the consent or collaboration with local elites. Cain's and Hopkin's assessment of the financial motivations behind the annexation of Egypt simply do not hold up to scrutiny when applied to the littoral zone.³³

Darwin's bridgehead thesis and the work done by Blythe and Sneh have done much to uncover the role played by India in the establishment of empire along the rim of the Indian Ocean. However, what is evidently needed is a more thorough examination of imperialism in the Red Sea, which remains an otherwise overlooked section of the imperial map. Furthermore, whilst Indian interests evidently played an important role in expansion, it is also important to acknowledge the influence of the bureaucracy in London, which debated and authorised the annexations demanded by sub-imperial interests.

³² Robert Blythe, *Empire of the Raj: India, Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858-1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan), 66-68.

³³ P.J. Cain, A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688 – 2015* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006 edn.), 344.

Study of Imperial Defence

Another key underpinning of this thesis is the substantially smaller range of literature on imperial defence. As it will argue, domestic concern over decline and the formation of an Empire-wide defence strategy in the 1860s and 1870s became one of the primary motivations for the extension of British imperial control over the shores of the Red Sea. Although the development of imperial defence has been less well-studied than the origins of British imperialism in Africa, it was nevertheless a crucial element in persuading the British government to extend control over the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coastlines following the culmination of the Egyptian crisis in 1882.

Military historians of imperial defence have focused on Britain's attempts in the late nineteenth century to develop an Empire-wide defence strategy which would provide a strategic framework for future hegemonic wars. Naturally, the majority of these scholars are naval historians, and their work has focused on the effort by British policymakers during the Victorian period to formulate a global defence strategy through a series of colonial and imperial defence committees held in Whitehall.

The first scholars of this school were Victorian military officers themselves, naval strategists who argued that Britain should rely upon the offensive strength of the Royal Navy alone to defend the Empire. Lieutenant-General William Jervois and Colonel E.H. Cotter, for example, both published articles and delivered speeches at the Royal United Services Institute in London at the turn of the century, outlining Britain's recent efforts to create a global defence strategy based upon a chain of fortified coaling stations.³⁴ Sir George Clark, a noted expert on fortifications who had served both as

³⁴ Sir W.F. Drummond Jervois, 'The Supremacy of the Navy for Imperial Defence,' lecture, Royal United Services Institute, London, 26 June 1891.

a Royal Engineer in Egypt and Sudan as well as secretary to the Colonial Defence Committee in 1885, also published works exploring the history of Britain's efforts to defend the Empire.³⁵

The first modern historian to specialise in imperial defence history, however, was Donald MacKenzie Schurman, a Canadian whose Cambridge doctoral thesis 'Imperial Defence, 1868-1887' was a groundbreaking study in Imperial military history. Unfortunately, due to the timing of his thesis in 1955, coinciding with the dissolution of Empire and a year before Britain's humiliating defeat in the Suez Canal Crisis, it was not published as a monograph until decades later.³⁶ Nevertheless, Schurman's work laid the foundation for a small but active community of British, Canadian, and American scholars who studied the relationship between navy and Empire. Although naval history had already been established as a distinct field of its own by historians such as John Knox Laughton and Alfred Thayer Mahan in the nineteenth century, Schurman pioneered the study of imperial defence. His thesis explored the establishment of the two Colonial Defence Committees in London (1878-79 and 1885-1904), and showed how these bodies formulated Britain's new imperial defence policy. Schurman relied heavily upon the official records left by the committees to examine the fractious infighting between various government departments, and highlighted the difficulty naval planners had in bringing together the Army and departmental factions to successfully create an imperial defence strategy.

Schurman's work introduced the field of imperial defence history, and his first book *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* established it as a genre within British military history in 1965.³⁷ Naval historians including John Major and Anthony Preston followed Schurman's example, publishing works which explored the relationship between Britain's naval and foreign policies during the late Victorian period. In 1967, Preston and

³⁵ G.S. Clark, *Fortifications: Its Past Achievements, Recent Developments, and Future Progress* (London: John Murray, 1890).

³⁶ Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*.

³⁷ Donald MacKenize Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (London: Cassell, 1965).

Major published *Send a Gunboat!: The Victorian Navy and Supremacy at Sea, 1854-1904*, which studied the construction and use of small gunboats throughout the Empire. The central claim of Preston's and Major's book was that the gunboat was an essential instrument of Victorian foreign policy, and their study showed how vital these small craft were in projecting British power on remote stations, such as interior of China or along the African coasts. Their book became the authoritative text on the Victorian navy's fleet of small ships, and their use in British imperial diplomacy.³⁸

Schurman, Preston, and Major were in turn followed by a younger generation of scholars. Historians such as John Beeler, T.G. Otte, Greg Kennedy, and Andrew Lambert have all broadened the genre, exploring various aspects of imperial defence and providing the first truly in-depth studies of British naval policy during the late Victorian period. Their work has shed light on a previously neglected topic, Britain's naval strategy in the second half of the nineteenth-century – a period the naval historian Oscar Parkes termed the 'Dark Ages of the Royal Navy.'³⁹ But on closer inspection, far from being a period of decay and neglect, the 1870s and 1880s were a time of strategic innovation and radical experimentation in ship design.⁴⁰ During this period, the Royal Navy introduced new classes of ships suited to warfare anywhere on the world's oceans, small gunboats which became a dynamic force in propelling the expansion of British imperial power.

The following thesis therefore recognises that imperialism in the region surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden came as part of a wider effort to build a global network of fleets and armies, which could steam or be transported quickly around the world by jumping from coaling station to coaling station and could be mobilised and coordinated instantly by undersea telegraph

³⁸ Anthony Preston and John Major, *Send a Gunboat: the Victorian Navy and Supremacy at Sea, 1854-1904* (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1967).

³⁹ Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 118.

⁴⁰ John Beeler, 'Steam, strategy and Schurman: imperial defence in the post-Crimean era, 1856-1905,' in *Far Flung Lines: Essays on Imperial Defence in Honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman*, ed. by Greg Kennedy and Keith Neilson (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 31.

cable. The development of an imperial defence strategy was a pressing domestic issue amongst key decisionmakers at the time, and was closely related to the wider movement to politically and economically integrate the empire into a Greater Britain capable of meeting the challenge posed by rising hegemonic powers.

The adoption of an imperial defence strategy meant that Britain abandoned the strategic thinking of the 1860s and 1870s, the so-called 'Fortress England' mentality.⁴¹ During this period, military planners under the direction of the army concentrated on developing plans to defend the United Kingdom and the colonies individually with local army and militia units sheltered behind elaborate fortifications.⁴² Beginning in 1873, however, naval strategists began instead to advocate a system of imperial defence through global, maritime deterrence.⁴³ Recognising that in future wars Britain would depend upon the Empire for support, strategists within the Admiralty argued that rather than preparing to defend individual territories from attack, Britain should concentrate on building up the supremacy of the Royal Navy and deploying vessels to every corner of the world's oceans. In order to mobilise and synchronise this global fleet, they also advocated the development a global communications system to connect the sprawling Empire. In their strategic vision, the Empire would be defended from its rivals not by the army and colonial militia, but merely by the omnipresent threat of a crippling naval counterattack.

Maintaining a worldwide network of fortified coaling stations and telegraph wires was central to this strategy, as it allowed planners in London to effectively coordinate the fleet which was spread out across the globe. A chain of naval fortresses and a global network of coaling stations would make it possible to station cruiser squadrons at strategic chokepoints and for coal-burning steam battleships to travel to every corner of the world's oceans. Securing the Red Sea and Gulf of

⁴¹ Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*, 23.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 27.

Aden was, therefore, much more than simply guarding the shipping line to India, it was a matter of protecting the Empire's central nervous system at its most vulnerable point.

Hence, the collapse of Egyptian and Ottoman control over the African shores of the sea and the Gulf, and the incursion of other European powers in the resulting power vacuum, demanded first the use of British troops to secure the ports, and then British civil administrators to impose order on the territory surrounding them. In fact, Britain's decision to subsume territory in northeastern Africa might even be seen as a failure of gunboat diplomacy, when the stationing of gunboats in the Red Sea alone became insufficient to defend Britain's interests in the Red Sea region. Preston and Major, for example, put forward the idea that the failure to control seaways and coastlines using only naval forces led to the rise of New Imperialism. In *Send a Gunboat!*, they argued that 'annexation gave more certain control over a territory than any number of gunboats cruising off the coast; this argument had hitherto been rejected by the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, but now world events gave it new force.'⁴⁴ The annexations of Somaliland and the island of Socotra were prime examples of this, as the occupation of either would jeopardise Britain's efforts to build a secure telegraph link to India and Australasia and to secure the fortified naval base in Aden.

Red Sea & Gulf of Aden

In contrast to the significant amount of previous scholarship on the origins of the partition of Africa and the less substantial work done on imperial defence, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden specifically have received markedly less attention from scholars. Indeed, there is a glaring gap in the literature dedicated to the waterway, despite its being a crucial avenue for trade and transportation, with very little extensive scholarly done on it during this period. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, given the waterway's importance for transportation and trade, and may be a reflection of a

⁴⁴ Anthony Preston and John Major, *Send a Gunboat!: A study of the Gunboat and its role in British policy, 1854-1904* (London: Longmans, 1967), 143.

historical European bias towards the Mediterranean Sea. As one historian has suggested, the lack of extensive settlements relative to the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean may have played a role in drawing scholarly attention away from the arid and sparsely-settled shores of the Red Sea.⁴⁵ In any case, literature on the Red Sea region is extremely limited, and no significant work to date has examined the history of the British Empire in the area over the course of the nineteenth century.

The diplomatic historian Agatha Ramm touched on the topic of British imperialism in the Red Sea in her 1944 article on Anglo-Italian negotiations over Italy's entry into the Red Sea as a naval and colonial power.⁴⁶ Ramm's article noted a shift in British policy towards the region in the middle of the century towards a more interventionist posture, inviting Italy in as a counterbalance to the French. Ramm was perhaps necessarily brief when analysing Britain's wider strategic interests in the Red Sea, but her article was nevertheless one of the first academic studies of maritime imperialism in the Red Sea.

A more substantial history of the British Empire in the Red Sea was published in 1961 by Thomas Marston, the library curator at Yale University.⁴⁷ Marston's monograph stemmed originally from his 1939 doctoral dissertation completed at Harvard University, and whilst his work was the first to analyse the Red Sea as a single oceanic region, his study ended in 1878 – before the most significant examples of British imperialism in the Red Sea took place. Therefore, whilst Marston arguably pioneered the study of British imperialism in the waterway, the truncated nature of his research prevented his book from offering a truly comprehensive overview of the expansion of British rule over this crucial region.

More recently, in 2013 Valeska Huber published a monograph examining the impact of the Suez Canal opening in 1869 on migration patterns and international politics on the Red Sea region

⁴⁵ Alexis Wick, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 24.

⁴⁶ Agatha Ramm, 'Great Britain and the Planting of Italian Power in the Red Sea, 1868 – 1885', *The English Historical Review* 59:234 (May 1944): 211-236.

⁴⁷ Thomas Marston, *Britain's Imperial Role in the Red Sea Area, 1800-1878* (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1961).

during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Huber's study analysed the completion of the canal in the wider context of imperialism and the geopolitical regional balance, drawing largely upon records of shipping firms which utilised the canal. As an example of transportation history, *Channelling Mobilities: Migrations and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* has become critical to understanding the impact of the Suez Canal on world trade and migration.

This was followed in 2016 with the first extensive history of the Red Sea, published by Alexis Wick. Inspired by Braudel's sweeping oceanic history of the Mediterranean basin, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* sheds valuable light on the Red Sea under Ottoman control during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Using a rich collection of primary sources from across the Red Sea region and analysed using an oceanic perspective, Wick explored the evolution of Ottoman influence over the sea. Arguing that the Red Sea has been viewed as an essentially empty space by Mediterranean-centric European scholars, Wick's book highlighted the distinct lack of scholarship on the sea. As Wick noted at the outset of his research, he was similarly surprised to discover how little has been written about the Red Sea, blaming a Hegelian tendency to view the Mediterranean as the most important body of water and the Red Sea as a mere 'hyphen' to the Indian Ocean. Wick attempted to address this disparity, underlining the Red Sea's status as a single space, a unit which like Braudel's Mediterranean integrates the territories, cultures, and polities surrounding it.

However, whilst Huber and Wick have successfully helped to reintroduce the notion of the Red Sea as a unitary space, neither of their works have charted in totality the rise of arguably one of the most important societies in the Red Sea, imperial Britain. The lack of modern scholarship on the growth of British imperial power in the Red Sea from its origins in 1799 to its zenith in 1899 represents a significant gap in the knowledge about one of the most important sections of the British Empire. In order to fully understand the British Empire in the Red Sea region, a similar ocean-

focused approach is needed to analyse British imperialism along the coasts of the sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Scholarship on the Royal Navy and Military Campaigns in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

Naval historians have also largely refrained from examining the Royal Navy's history in the Red Sea during the Victorian period. This may be a reflection of the fact that no other power managed to seriously challenge Britain's naval presence in the waterway. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain deployed more warships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and erected more fortifications than either France or Italy, neither of whom could afford to deploy similar levels of ships and materiel to the region. No open conflicts broke out between the European powers in the Red Sea and the Gulf, and Britain, France, and Italy ultimately elected to settle border disputes in the region through bilateral agreements. Although France and Italy evidently recognised the importance of the new strategic waterway, neither power was able to approach parity with the Royal Navy in the Red Sea or the Gulf.

In the absence of any naval clashes in the Red Sea, one tendency of naval historians has been to focus on the Royal Navy's campaign against the slave trade off the east coast of Africa which began in 1863.⁴⁸ This trend can be traced back to 1873, when Philip Howard Colomb, commanding HMS *Dryad*, published a memoir on his experiences in the East Indies Station's anti-slaving campaign.⁴⁹ Colomb's book proved to be a best-seller, and became part of the traditional, self-congratulatory narrative about Britain's role in ending the slave trade which began with the abolitionist movement and continued unchallenged until 1944.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ F. Montrésor, 'Special instructions for the guidance of captains and commanders of HM Ships and vessels when on detached service in the Red Sea or Persian Gulf,' East Indies Station, 1863. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 3 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 263.

⁴⁹ P.H. Colomb, *Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean: a Record of Naval Experiences* (London: Longmans, 1873).

⁵⁰ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

Although the naval anti-slavery patrols off the coast of East Africa have received less attention than the patrols mounted off the west coast, some significant modern scholarly work has been produced exploring the navy's role in interdicting the slave trade between Africa and Arabia.⁵¹ Work in this field has pointed to European anti-slavery campaigns as the root cause of imperialism along the east African coast. The economic historian, Richard D. Wolff, for example, wrote that 'the evolving interaction of British imperialism in the nineteenth century and the slave trade in East Africa led ultimately to the decision to annex and colonize several territories there.'⁵² A sort of paternalistic humanitarianism was, according to this perspective, the precursor to empire, enforced through squadrons of gunboats and battalions of marines stationed off the coast, and sanctioned by missionary societies and anti-slavery groups back in Europe.

Beyond discussions over slavery, more recent scholarship by Steven Gray has indirectly addressed the importance of mobility for the Royal Navy in the Red Sea through his exploration of the coal question in the late nineteenth century. After the abolition of sails, the navy's ability to maintain a global presence quickly became dependent upon Britain's ability to store and maintain coal depots along the world's major sea lanes. The Royal Navy's mission to dominate all the world's major shipping lanes, including that which ran through the Red Sea, was underpinned by regular, fortified stocks of coal at stations such as Aden – 'without it the Royal Navy would be unable to fulfil its global role as the primary defence of British commerce and possessions.'⁵³

The navy's coaling infrastructure and worldwide presence required uninterrupted use of the global sea lanes to facilitate the movement of cruisers in the imperial periphery and the battlefleet in times of war as well as to secure telegraphic communication between strategic nodes.⁵⁴ This capability would prove to be crucial in realising the creation of a Greater Britain able to withstand

⁵¹ Reginald Coupland, *The Exploitation of East Africa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

⁵² Richard D. Wolff, 'British Imperialism and the East African Slave Trade,' *Science and Society* 36:4 (1972), 443.

⁵³ Steven Gray, 'Fuelling Mobility: Coal and Britain's Naval Power, C. 1870–1914,' *Journal of Historical Geography* 58 (2017), 94.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

the challenge of the future continental superpowers by giving Britain the same worldwide reach and access to populations and resources.

By contrast, although military historians have long studied various campaigns in the Red Sea region such as the Anglo-Sudanese Wars and the Italian-Abyssinian conflict, there has been a tendency to ignore the wider regional context. This may be the natural result of the traditional landward focus of studying armies and desert campaigns. However, it fails to recognise regional implications, treating territories as individual case studies rather than component parts of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden oceanic region. Historians in this vein have focused on the British intervention in Egypt, for example, with little reference to British expansion into Somaliland or the development of the naval fortress at Aden.

There is an abundance of scholarly and popular works on these military campaigns, dating back to the memoirs published in the 1880s and 1890s by journalists and officers who had served on them.⁵⁵ Though illuminating in their own right, memoirs such as the famed war correspondent Bennet Burleigh's *Desert Warfare* and Charles Royle's *The Egyptian Campaigns, 1882 to 1885* were very much products of their time. Devoted almost entirely to descriptions of tactics and field manoeuvres, the political analysis in these Victorian accounts is sketchy at best, and rarely deviates from familiar tropes about the 'civilising mission.'

Possibly the most influential of these has been Winston Churchill's *The River War*. Published as an eyewitness account of Kitchener's successful reconquest of Sudan in the 1890s, Churchill did include a historical overview of Britain's involvement in the Sudan. Far from recognising the profound changes to British regional policy which had led to the intervention in Sudan – he dismissed the annexation of the port of Suakin saying 'as [the Government] fought without reason,

⁵⁵ An Officer Who Was There, *Suakin: 1885, Being a Sketch of the Campaign this Year* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, and Co., 1885).

so they conquered without profit'⁵⁶ – Churchill reinforced a 'traditional' view of the Anglo-Sudanese Wars. His analysis of the conflict was one of gallant British soldiers avenging the murdered General Gordon at the hands of a wild fanatic. Without any reference to growing British political involvement in other territories along the African coast of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, *The River War* painted a picture of the war which would be reiterated repeatedly in British culture, including in popular literature and on the silver screen.

More recent scholarship has continued this pattern of examining British military campaigns in the region in isolation, omitting the wider regional and strategic context. Although much of this work has been conducted by acclaimed scholars such as Peter Holt and Martin Daly, the two leading authorities on Sudanese history, it fails to cover the obvious gap in contemporary understanding of Britain's military and political involvement in the countries surrounding the waterway. Philip Warner, for example, in his sweeping and highly-detailed appraisal of the rise and fall of the Mahdist state in the 1880s and 1890s criticised the Gladstone ministry's response to the Mahdi's revolt as 'muddled', suggesting that the British government's decision to withdraw from Sudan whilst deploying an intervention force to Suakin indicated that it 'did not know its own mind.'⁵⁷ Although his criticism of Gladstone's leadership and of resulting failures in eastern Sudan was not inaccurate, his account of the Sudanese campaigns did not take into account the wider context of imperial defence and national decline. Indeed, the very fact that the Cabinet did consent to sending troops to the Red Sea coast whilst in a contradictory manner pressuring the Egyptians into withdrawing from the remainder of Sudan suggests there was a significant and compelling rationale for doing so.

A more thorough understanding of the dynamics of British imperialism in the Red Sea region is therefore necessary in order to deepen the existing interpretations of imperial expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden waterway represents one of the last blank spots on the

⁵⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1899), 32.

⁵⁷ Philip Warner, *Dervish: The Rise and Fall of an African Empire* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010).

historiographical map of European imperialism on the continent in the late nineteenth century despite its obvious strategic importance for the contemporary maritime powers and establishments of bridgeheads of imperial power along its shores. By taking holistic view of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden waterway, this project aims to bring together formerly disparate strands of scholarship on the military and political situation in the area to explain the expansion of formal British imperial power in northeastern Africa.

Research Challenges & Outlook

The primary challenge faced by this thesis is maintaining its focus on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The historical background of several territories included in this region, notably Egypt and Kenya, are some of the most heavily scrutinised in the field of Imperial history. The large archival collections associated with British colonialism in these countries have been, individually, studied intensively by generations of scholars in the field, along with the history of the Victorian Royal Navy more generally. By necessity, this project remains strictly limited to the topic of the Red Sea waterway, seeking only to discover whether naval considerations in these waters played a role in the expansion of the Empire into neighbouring territories. In order to operate within its restrictions, the thesis maintains a balance between primary sources pertaining specifically to this research question and the insights gleaned by other scholars in supporting fields.

Another difficulty in assessing the motivations behind British imperialism is the lack of Cabinet records. It was not until the twentieth century that the Cabinet began keeping minutes, or even drafting written agendas. The only recorded evidence of Cabinet decisions were the letters, heavily polished and edited, sent by the Prime Minister to the Sovereign, as well as private notes and memoranda taken by Cabinet members present at meetings. Although photographic copies of the Prime Minister's letters to Queen Victoria are held in the National Archives, these letters do not

contain the frank strategic calculations which must have taken place amongst the Secretaries of State, military officials, and their advisors when assessing what action to take.

One of the challenges of this project, therefore, will be establishing the motivations behind British imperialism in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden from the evidence which remains, including the internal reports and memoranda circulated throughout the government departments in Whitehall and the maps of the sea which statesmen studied when formulating policy. The personal diaries of naval and military officers stationed in the Red Sea region have also been consulted, including the papers of Robert Molyneux, an officer who was promoted to the position of commodore of the Royal Navy's Red Sea Division during the Mahdist crisis in 1884 and 1885. The correspondence between officers is often quite illuminating, giving a sense of their perspective on the Royal Navy's mission in the Red Sea, and how they attempted to carry out their orders from the Admiralty.

This study also examines which of the Royal Navy's ships were deployed to the region. By tracing what classes of gunboats were assigned to stations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden; their intended use; and specifications about their armour, propulsion, and firepower, this thesis gleans insight into the Admiralty's strategic thinking when it deployed ships to the East Indies Squadron and the Red Sea Division. Commanders of the East Indies Squadron kept meticulous notes on which ships were employed on missions throughout the station, and one can trace the movement of ships and marines throughout the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Furthermore, by calculating the total tonnage of all the ships in the region, it is possible to plot the combined total weight of Her Majesty's warships in the sea every year between 1869 and 1900. When these figures are displayed on a chart, it quickly becomes apparent that the navy devoted more and more tonnage to the Red Sea as the nineteenth century progressed, and that dramatic spikes in tonnage occurred during months of international crisis, such as the 1885 war scare with Russia. What is more, the average weight of every Royal Navy ships in the region increased after the opening of the Suez Canal, indicating that the Admiralty began sending larger and more heavily armed gunboats to the sea as the century wore on.

The records of the office of the Inspector-General of Fortifications similarly reveal the increasingly expensive defences which Britain constructed around the ports under its control in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and at whom they were directed against. At the Sudanese port of Suakin, for example, the British built elaborate stone ramparts and bastions after taking the town during the 1884 Mahdist uprising. Belts of stone walls, ditches, rifle pits, and even landmines were covered by heavy naval guns installed in quadrangle bastions. A narrow-gauge railway connected these positions to the docks, where munitions unloaded by ships could be taken directly to the guns. These defences, however, were directed against the Mahdists who had overthrown the Egyptian colonial government, and who in 1884 and 1885 represented the greatest threat to the British position in Suakin. By contrast, the defences built around Aden later on in the decade were designed entirely for coastal defence, with mutually-supporting coastal batteries, electric minefields, and anti-torpedo netting. Unlike the ones erected at Suakin, these fortifications were built to prevent an attack from a European, blue-water force.

Where this thesis hopes to break new ground is by bringing together, for the first time, sources from a wide variety of collections, including official records, technical details on ships and where they were deployed, the personal recollections of officers posted to the sea, maps and navigational aids, records of the telegraph operators in the region, and analyses on the fortifications which were constructed. Although these sources have not been previously consulted together, this study aims to provide a more complete picture of Britain's strategic ambitions in the Red Sea over the entire nineteenth century, and to give a sense of what degree naval security and imperial defence had on driving British imperialism in the region. It must be acknowledged that a variety of factors invariably lay behind the government's decision to declare protectorates or to reinforce naval units in the Red Sea. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, other factors, such as efforts to eradicate the slave trade and to secure zones of economic control, were of secondary or tertiary importance to Britain's civilian and military leaders when launching new military expeditions or

seizing territory in northeastern Africa. By themselves, they are insufficient to explain why Britain chose to annex huge stretches of territory in the region.

Chapter I begins by giving an overview of the political and strategic situation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden before the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, including the region's geography and most important features. The geology of the sea, its reefs, the islands which dot the major shipping lines, and the winds and currents all are crucial to understanding the strategic situation in the early nineteenth century. The chapter explores the establishment of the Royal Navy's first semi-permanent squadron in the Red Sea as well as the first territorial annexations in the region carried out in the name of imperial security.

Chapter II delves into the background behind the advent of imperial defence strategy, including its precursor, Fortress England, and the innovations in shipping, artillery and communications which underpinned the vision of an imperial Greater Britain. After a succession of international conflicts in the 1860s exposed long-term British weaknesses, strategists and policymakers in Britain increasingly came to view the British Empire as a single political unit capable of competing with future hegemonic powers. It is necessary to understand the development of imperial defence as a context in which to view British involvement in the Red Sea region. Chapter II draws most heavily off the work of imperial defence historians, and provides a theoretical backdrop to British imperialism in northeastern Africa in the 1880s.

Chapter III discusses increasing British involvement in the Red Sea region over the course of the 1860s and 1870s, including the growth of shipping and communications through the waterway. During this period the British controlled the shores of the Red Sea indirectly through the Egyptian colonial empire, relying on Egyptian claims to block other maritime powers from seizing the handful of deep-water harbours in the waterway suitable for warships. It was also over these decades that the first telegraph link between Britain and India opened through the Red Sea, a link which would become the Empire's most important cable connecting Britain with India, Australasia, and the South

African colonies. Chapter III also addresses the arguments made by previous historians that the navy's anti-slavery patrols in the Red Sea acted as a precursor to imperial expansion, noting that the archival evidence indicates otherwise.

Chapter IV explores the two military expeditions dispatched to the Sudanese port of Suakin in 1884 and 1885 during the Mahdist rebellion. These two expeditions provide a useful case study of the effects which pursuing the imperial defence policy had on the expansion of the British Empire in the Red Sea littoral. Chapter IV will outline the history of the Mahdist rebellion, including its underlying causes and the response by the British and Egyptian governments to the crisis, before moving on to the actions fought around Suakin. Although Prime Minister William Gladstone forced Egypt to essentially abandon its largest colonial province, at the same time his Cabinet authorised two large military interventions into the eastern Sudan and planned to construct a strategic railway from the coast to the Nile to cement British power in the region.

Out of the context of imperial defence, these expeditions appear to be anomalies, and historians have failed to offer a persuasive alternative explanation for why they were launched. Instead, Chapter IV will explain how the Suakin expeditions fit into an aggressive pattern of naval enforcement in the Red Sea, and how they laid the foundation for future incursions into the Mahdist Sudan. Furthermore, in this chapter the formation of protectorates over Somaliland and the Hadramaut coastline will be discussed, as effective British occupation of these territories began in the aftermath of the Suakin campaigns. Having secured the Sudanese Red Sea ports, naval commanders and officials in Whitehall turned their attention to the ports on the Gulf of Aden, and much like Suakin, these ports came under *de facto* British control in 1885.

The main focus of Chapter V is the extension of British rule over East Africa, beginning at the Kenyan port of Mombasa. During the late 1880s and 1890s, the Empire was extended steadily into the African interior, and was driven by individuals committed to defending Britain's maritime interests along the eastern coastline as well as the vision of Greater Britain. Driven by fears that

Germany would outmanoeuvre Britain and a recognition that Zanzibar alone could not sustain British interests on the eastern shore of the Indian Ocean, Mombasa was targeted as a potentially vital harbour in the region.

Similarly, the destruction of an Italian army at the Battle of Adowa in 1896 threatened to upend the balance of power along the Red Sea littoral. Chapter V demonstrates how in reaction, the Cabinet decided to unleash Horatio Kitchener to reconquer Sudan using an Anglo-Egyptian army,⁵⁸ which effectively destroyed the Mahdist state in a single day at the Battle of Omdurman two years later in 1898.

The study then ends in 1899, when the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium was declared over the Sudan, a polite fiction which obscured Britain's total control of Egypt's former colony. With the destruction of the Mahdist movement which had overthrown Egyptian rule over Sudan in 1884, Britain asserted its supremacy over all potential rivals, and ensured that no European rival would threaten the communication and transport link through the Red Sea.

Since the age of high imperialism itself, historians have argued over the causes of European imperialism. However, there still remain serious questions about the catalysts and underlying motivations behind the Scramble for Africa. Clearly, the socio-economic theories put forward originally by the Marxist scholars of the early twentieth century and the Robinson and Gallagher Suez hypothesis have not adequately explained why Britain and its colonial rivals spent enormous sums of blood and treasure on acquiring large tracts of economically unattractive African territory. Although British cabinets undoubtedly faced a multitude of factors which affected Britain's foreign and colonial policy, the role of played by the development of the imperial defence strategy cannot be overlooked. Whilst naval power and the ability to project military strength throughout the world was only one aspect of the British Empire, it nevertheless played a considerable role in shaping

⁵⁸ Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England, 1830-1902* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 160.

Britain's imperial policy in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. As all of northeastern Africa was directly or indirectly connected to the waterway, a study of British naval strategy in the region promises to shed light on the formation of a considerable percentage of Britain's African empire.

Chapter I

Introduction

Any discussion of the Red Sea must first focus on the natural geography of the waterway and the effect of local conditions on navigation through the sea. The difficulties in transiting through the Red Sea dictated the way in which maritime powers approached it. In his 2001 study of navigation in the Red Sea, Portuguese naval officer and historian of navigation José Manuel Malhão Pereira concluded that until the invention of the steam engine, the sea was 'more an obstacle than a means of communication from east to west.'¹

The Red Sea is formed of a 1200 mile-long rift between the African and Arabian tectonic plates and many of the islands in the sea are of volcanic origin. Though deep along its central channel, the sea is ringed by reefs and shoals, making navigation along its coast potentially hazardous to those without local knowledge.² Whilst the current in the central channel is slow, coral reefs and rocks can cause dangerous eddies, increasing the risk to ships attempting to dock at any of the ports in the sea.³

The prevailing winds in the Red Sea make passage through the waterway particularly challenging. Contrary wind patterns limit the ability of ships to enter and exit the sea depending upon the onset of the annual monsoon season, and persistent northerly winds make passage up the Red Sea to Suez difficult. Whilst large ships can sail south during summer, those sailing north are obliged to tack in order to make progress against the wind, making travel north slow. So difficult is it to sail north up the Red Sea, most Europe-bound voyages during Antiquity ended at one of the

¹ José Manuel Malhão Pereira, 'The Mighty Red Sea,' paper presented at the International Seminar on Maritime Activities in India with Reference to the Portuguese 1500-1800, University of Goa, 15 April 2001.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

African or Arabian ports south of the eighteenth parallel with the remainder of the journey completed by land.⁴ Attempts by Portuguese fleets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to wrest control the sea from the Turks during the Age of Discovery were repeatedly thwarted by adverse wind conditions and by the difficulties in manoeuvring fleets in the narrow confines of the waterway.⁵

The Red Sea is also located in one of the hottest and driest areas on the planet. Rain is rare and dust storms are common, and as no major rivers drain into the sea, supplies of fresh water along either coastline are scarce. The coastal plains and mountains which surround the sea on both its western and eastern sides are barren and inhospitable, increasing the challenge to voyagers attempting to traverse its length. Concerns over water supplies and high temperatures would routinely hamper the Royal Navy's efforts to expand its presence into the Red Sea throughout the nineteenth century.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

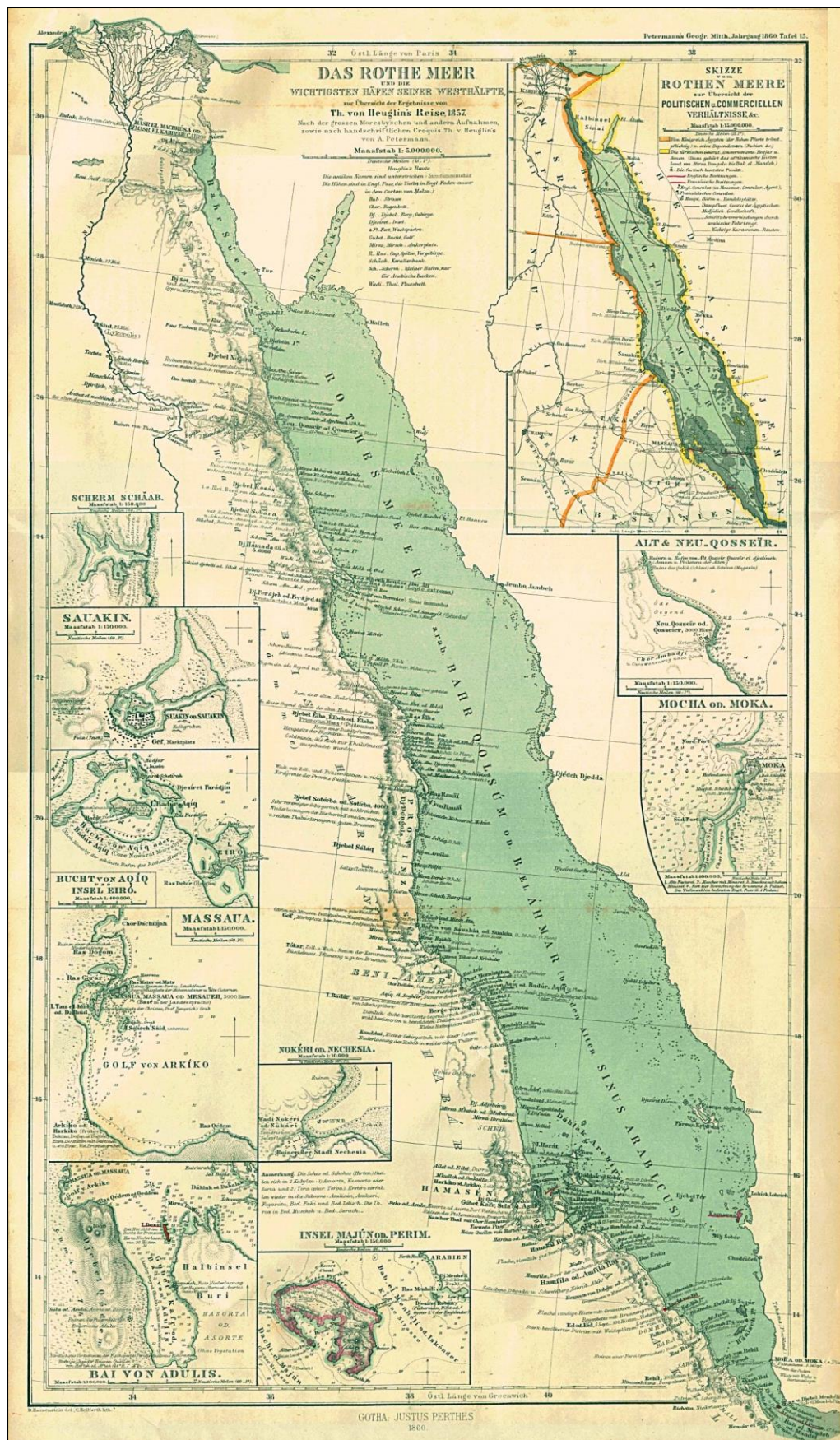


Figure 1: Geographic map of the Red Sea. Port Suez is at the northern end of the sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait at the southern end leading into the Gulf of Aden. Perim Island is located in the middle of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

A. Petermann, *Das Rothe Meer und die Wichtigsten Hafen Seiner Westhalfte* [map], 1:5000000, Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthe, *Geographischer Anstalt über Wichtige Neue Erforschungen auf dem Gesamtgebiete der Geographie*, vol. 6. 1860.

https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/red_sea_1860.jpg. (16 June 2018).

The difficulties of sailing through the Red Sea limited the information available to early British mariners attempting to sail into its largely unexplored waters. Although the first English ship to enter the Red Sea sailed to the Yemeni port of Mocha in 1606, maps of the region remained rudimentary until the late eighteenth century. Beginning in 1781, the Admiralty began publishing charts of the Red Sea. These were basic maps of the region, typically based on earlier reports from Portuguese, French, and Dutch cartographers, some even then centuries-old.⁶ Without accurate charts of the few harbours in the Red Sea, attempting to sail through the reefs lining the shorelines would have been a formidable challenge for contemporary sailors.

Simple as these early maps were, they may have spurred interest amongst East India Company officials by presenting the possibility of developing a maritime link back to Britain via the Mediterranean Sea.⁷ In 1786, the company agreed to deploy a consular agent to Egypt specifically to oversee the development of a new communications route to Europe, and an armed cruiser from the company's Bengal station was ordered to perform an annual voyage to Suez to deliver and receive mails from London.⁸ The pattern of the Asian monsoon season meant that the vessel could only perform one round trip between Fort St. George at Madras and Suez per year, but the new overland route through Egypt promised a much faster means of communication between officials in Britain and in India.⁹

Nevertheless, despite occasional visits by British merchantmen to the Red Sea, until the end of the eighteenth century and the outbreak of the French revolutionary wars, the sea remained a

⁶ British Library, London, Maps Collections, *Port and City of Suaquem on the Coast of Abexim in the Red Sea*, 1781.

⁷ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/6, Correspondence and Papers about the Overland Route through Egypt, Report of a Committee of Correspondence, 1 June 1786.

⁸ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/6, Correspondence and Papers about the Overland Route through Egypt, Report of a Secret Court of Directors, 27 June 1786.

⁹ Ibid.

backwater. The difficulties of travelling north to Suez and the limited commercial opportunities along the waterway meant it was viewed by most as a strategic dead-end.

Napoleon

From its very inception, British interest in the Red Sea was prompted by fear of the expansion of French naval power into the waterway, the common denominator for British involvement in the sea throughout the long nineteenth century. The earliest record of French interest in the sea can be traced to a letter preserved in House of Hanover's archives from the German man of letters Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz urging Louis XIV to consider invading Egypt. This move, Leibniz claimed, would put France at the centre of world trade and would lay the foundation for a successful crusade against Jerusalem. As he wrote to Versailles, France 'might secure itself, by the conquest of Egypt, a Universal Empire' – a clear appeal to memories of Rome.¹⁰ Though Leibniz's proposal may have been an attempt to distract the land-hungry Sun King away from the weakened German states still struggling to recover from the Thirty Years' War, it was nevertheless received favourably by Louis. Although the proposal was never acted upon, the letter's favourable reception represented an early French recognition that the trade route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean would be an important prize for any aspiring global power in the future.

Louis XIV became too embroiled in successive European conflicts to seriously contemplate conquests in the Middle East, and the invasion of Egypt was left to his spiritual heir, Napoleon Bonaparte. After a successful campaign in Italy, in 1798 Bonaparte landed with a revolutionary army in Alexandria after successfully evading the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet commanded by Lord Nelson. Napoleon had been ordered by the Directory to seize Egypt as a means of establishing

¹⁰ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Abstract of a Letter from Leibnitz to Louis XIV.

French influence in the Middle East and to link up with French allies in India in order to threaten British hegemony over the subcontinent. The object of his mission was obvious to British observers at the time, and thus even as early as the Georgian period, statesmen sought to secure British control over the Red Sea as a means of blocking French power. 'When it is considered of how much consequence the Commerce and Revenue of India is to this Kingdom, it cannot be matter of surprise that the French should be strenuous in their attempts to deprive us of the resources derived from thence,'¹¹ wrote Alexander Dalrymple, the Admiralty's first hydrographer.¹² He concluded 'I am fully convinced that in many points of view, [the French seizure of Egypt] is a matter that claims every effort on our own part to prevent.'¹³

Dalrymple spoke for his contemporaries in the Admiralty as well as the Board of Control, perhaps unsurprisingly given the then long struggle between Britain and France for control of India throughout the eighteenth century. In response to Napoleon's successful conquest of Egypt, Admiral Peter Rainier, commander-in-chief of the East Indies Station, despatched two fourth-rates, HMS *Centurion* and HMS *Albatross*, one frigate and two sloops to the Red Sea in order to forestall any possible French advance on India.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that in its recommendation to Rainier, the council of the Bombay Presidency stated that the best means of defending India from a possible amphibious invasion was 'Counteracting the designs of the enemy either in collecting Vessels and Boats in the different ports of the Red Sea or in proceeding down towards India.'¹⁵ This assessment suggests that even as early as the eighteenth century, British policymakers in India recognised that

¹¹ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Memoir concerning Egypt and the Red Sea, Alexander Dalrymple, 1798.

¹² Andrew S. Cook, 'Dalrymple, Alexander (1737-1808).' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7044>, accessed 17 December 2017].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Martin Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy: The Napoleonic Wars* (London: IB Tauris & Co., 2014), 95.

¹⁵ Exeter University, T66A/52-3, Bombay Diary, Council Meeting Minutes, 28 September 1798, quoted in Peter A. Ward, *British Naval Power in the East 1794-1805: The Command of Admiral Peter Rainier* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 79.

the acquisition of ports in the Red Sea by hostile foreign powers represented a strategic threat to British maritime and Indian interests. Although in 1798 it was possible to forestall this possibility by simply stationing warships in the Red Sea, the collapse of native states in the region in the following century would effectively open these ports up to foreign capture.

During its brief deployment to the Red Sea, Rainier's squadron bombarded French positions in Koessir and temporarily occupied Aden before being withdrawn following French defeats in the Middle East, not least the Battle of the Nile, which broke French communications with Egypt.¹⁶ In 1801, Rainier's fleet returned to convoy a detachment up the Red Sea from India to Suez as part of a final drive to push the occupying French army out of Egypt,¹⁷ incidentally resulting in the production of the first accurate hydrographic charts of the sea along its entire length.¹⁸

Most notably, in addition to the stationing of a semi-permanent squadron in the Red Sea, the French invasion of Egypt also led to the first attempts by the British to annex territory in the region. On the recommendation of the Bombay Council, in 1799, HMS *Centurion* was ordered by Rainier to take possession of Perim, the small island which lies in the midst of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and which was thought to command the waterway connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.¹⁹ Lieutenant-Colonel John Murray of the 84th Regiment of Foot along with 300 men were transported by *Centurion* to formally lay claim to the island and to establish a garrison, with a view to installing batteries to overlook the strait.²⁰ At this time, the legal status of the island was ambiguous. The only previous attempt to fortify the island was a brief scouting mission carried out

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Secret memoranda ordering a force to be sent from India to co-operate in expelling the French from Egypt, 25 May 1801.

¹⁸ Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 95.

¹⁹ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Extract of Letter from Admiral Rainier, 3 December 1798.

²⁰ H. M. Chichester, 'Murray, Sir John, eighth baronet (1768?–1827)', rev. Roger T. Stearn, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19633>, accessed 19 June 2016].

by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and Murray's letters indicate that even the small Arab fishing village on Perim had been abandoned by the time he arrived in 1799.

The main obstacle to establishing a garrison on the island became apparent soon after landing. Murray reported to his superiors that, 'I am sorry to inform you that this Island is perfectly barren and upon the little appearance we at present have of finding water here we shall be obliged to travel to the opposite Coasts for this valuable Article as well as for all our other Supplies.'²¹ To make matters worse, it also became clear that even the heaviest cannon lacked sufficient range to cover the nine miles separating Perim from the African shoreline, effectively ending the island's supposed strategic importance as a gateway controlling the strait. Murray wrote, 'it is with no less regret that I inform you that no Batteries erected on the Island can Command the Entrance to the Red Sea.'²²

Nevertheless, Murray was ordered to remain on Perim, and his letters to his commanding officers in India became increasingly anxious as water supplies dwindled. In June, Murray assessed that the island could not be held against a concerted attack by a European force.²³ In response to his concerns regarding the water supply, the East India Company arranged for special boring drills to be shipped to Perim to sink wells on the island. However, by December 1799 Murray was forced to evacuate most of his garrison to Aden as the wells yielded only brackish water unfit for drinking.²⁴

In January 1800, Murray and the remainder of the garrison withdrew from Perim after their water supplies finally ran out. Murray wrote to commanders in India that 'I hope to convince your Honourable Board that [a garrison on Perim] is totally useless, even if practicable to maintain it.'²⁵

²¹ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Extract Letter from Colonel Murray, 7 May 1799.

²² Ibid.

²³ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Extract Letter from Colonel Murray, 25 June 1799.

²⁴ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Extract Letter from Colonel Murray, 17 December 1799.

²⁵ British Library, London, IOR/H/470, Wellesley Papers No. 14, Letter from John Murray to Marquis Wellesley, 2 January 1800.

Marquis Wellesley, the Governor-General of India, concurred with Murray's assessment of Perim's potential as a strategic asset and recommended that no further attempts be made to fortify the island.²⁶

The scheme to annex Perim and to turn the island into a strategic fortress to thwart French naval power failed. However, it was notable because it was the first, albeit abortive, attempt to expand the British Empire into northeastern Africa. In a pattern which would later be repeated throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, anxiety that another power would come to dominate the Red Sea and threaten British maritime control over the western Indian Ocean led to calls to pre-emptively seize territory. Despite the expedition's initial failure, the rationale which lay behind it remained unchallenged.

Following Murray's return to India, his military and political superiors began scouting for a more suitable port in the area which could be turned into a naval base. As an alternative to Perim, Murray had suggested to Wellesley that Aden was better suited as a potential naval base, possessing a deep and sheltered harbour as well as access to fresh water supplies.²⁷ Murray claimed he was 'decidedly of the Opinion that is preferable to any Port we can Occupy without employing Force at this End of the Gulf.'²⁸ According to Murray, the place was also easily defended against the local Arab tribes as well as any potential European adversaries in those waters.²⁹ Wellesley clearly agreed with the assessment, recommending to Jonathan Duncan, Governor of Bombay, the establishment of a permanent naval station in Aden. Wellesley noted that, the 'importance of the Port of Aden is suggested by the possibility of its becoming expedient (with a view to guarding in the most effectual manner against the projects of the French in Egypt) to establish a permanent Naval Station in the

²⁶ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Extract of Bombay Political Consultations, 26 February 1800.

²⁷ British Library, London, IOR/H/470, Wellesley Papers No. 14, Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Murray to Marquis Wellesley, 1 February 1800.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Gulph [sic] of Arabia'.³⁰ This assessment was also apparently supported by Admiral Blankett, the commander of the Royal Navy's semi-permanent Red Sea squadron, as Wellesley stated that 'the judgement of Admiral Blankett on this question appears to us to be decisive.'³¹ Blankett, who had previously played a critical role in the Perim expedition, was by this time 'fully in command in the Red Sea and intelligence primarily flowed through him.'³² As such, Blankett was one of the most knowledgeable experts on the area, and whilst he clearly recognised it was impossible to plug the southern entrance to the Red Sea entirely, Aden would prove to be a valuable base from which to project naval power into the surrounding waters.

Captain Sir Home Popham, RA, who had become something of an expert on the Red Sea for the British government, seconded this analysis. Popham accompanied the army's expedition to Suez in 1801, and during his voyage from India he was careful to ensure that the first accurate charts of the Red Sea were produced.³³ After landing the army at Suez, Popham had been tasked by the secret committee of the East India Company to negotiate trade treaties with the Arab states along the Red Sea coastline of western Arabia.³⁴ From his reports to company officials, Popham made it clear that he viewed the Red Sea as both a strategic and commercial asset, and negotiated trade deals with the native states as a means of expanding British political influence into the area. To Wellesley he wrote,

Previous to this War, Egypt in its political application, was esteemed merely as a channel of correspondence to India tho' on occasions of great personal advantage it has been used as the shortest route by some individuals; but those who have written on the subject knew so little of its resources, and held those of the Red Sea in so contemptible a light that it was long considered a most speculative key to our Indian possessions. We are convinced however by experience that it is not only a very possible one but may if neglected in the

³⁰ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Letter from the Governor-General, Fort William, to the Governor-in-Council, Bombay, 4 February 1800.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ward, *British Naval Power in the East 1794-1805*, 112.

³³ H. Popham, 'Popham, Sir Home Riggs (1762 – 1820), naval officer,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2015 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-22541>].

³⁴ Ibid.

event of another War, become an immediate point of descent under information and advantage, which on the present occasion our Enemies did not possess.³⁵

Although the response to this report has not survived, if it existed at all, the document nevertheless suggests a growing official interest in the strategic potential of the Red Sea.

An assessment compiled by an unknown official in the Governor-General's office one month after receiving Popham's report appears to support this conclusion. The assessment warned frankly that, 'It is not probable that under any change, this object [the conquest of Egypt] will be lost sight of by [France]. Should the army of Buonaparte be annihilated, and the idea of Conquest be given up, new relations of Amity may hereafter be formed between France and the Porte; and Egypt may at some future time be made the Route for a French Army to India.'³⁶ The author argued that, 'the power of commanding the Navigation of the Red Sea can alone secure us against such a Danger. This requires that we should be in possession of some good port for the purpose of giving shelter to our Ships, and for furnishing them with Supplies.'³⁷ In a foreshadowing of events to come in the 1870s and 1880s, the report identified Massawa and Suakin as suitable ports for the construction of naval facilities.

Perhaps even more significantly, the memorandum recommended what would become the established pattern of imperial expansion in northeastern Africa. In order to control Massawa and Suakin effectively, the author urged British officials to seek a concession from the Ottoman sultan for the ports as well as for the territory in the African interior upon which the ports depended economically.³⁸ This included areas of the Ethiopian highlands and the eastern Sudan from which trade flowed to the Red Sea ports. The report concluded that the best course of action to secure

³⁵ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), Secret and Political Letter from Sir Home Popham to the Marquis Wellesley, 26 July 1802.

³⁶ British Library, London, IOR/G/17/7, Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), A sketch relative to the trade of India to the Red Sea, 2 August 1802.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

British political interests in the area was to obtain a general cession over a large swathe of African territory:

Under the circumstances of our own present connection with the Porte, and with the declared purpose of our sending a Fleet into the Red Sea for the support of her interests it is conceived, that a cession of Massua, Dabarwa, and Suaken [sic] could not be difficult to obtain. It would be politic to include in that Cession all the pretensions of the Turkish Government on the African side of the Red Sea to the Frontiers of Egypt.³⁹

Although this proposal was not acted upon, it resembled many of the actions taken by future British governments to block European rivals from obtaining a maritime advantage in the Red Sea. Indirect rule and influence through the Ottoman Turks and their Egyptian vassals initially defined Britain's involvement in the Red Sea region after the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, and bore many similarities with the proposals outlined in the above report. It is important to note that calls for territorial expansion were always presaged by the discovery of supposed French, Egyptian, or Italian designs on the Red Sea.

The Salt Expedition

The British government also reacted to the French occupation of Egypt by organising an expedition in 1800 to India and Abyssinia.⁴⁰ The expedition was formally put under the command of George Annesley, Viscount Valentia and nephew of Wellesley, who was to represent the British government in India, whilst his assistant, Henry Salt, was despatched to Abyssinia and Somalia to provide accurate maps of the region and to conduct trade negotiations with local rulers there. Salt was originally introduced to Valentia by his uncle whilst studying in London, and impressed with the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The National Archives, Kew, FO 1/1, Abyssinia – Lord Valentia and Mr. Salt, Letter from Viscount Valentia to Henry Salt, 1 November 1800.

young man's confident manner, Valentia agreed to take him on the voyage as a personal assistant.⁴¹ Letters from Valentia to Salt make it clear that members of the expedition were empowered to act on behalf of the British government, indicating that this was very much an official diplomatic mission.⁴² Given the French presence in Egypt and the efforts which were then being undertaken to counterbalance this threat in the Red Sea, the expedition was clearly part of a wider strategy of expanding British influence as a means of creating buffers against French power in Egypt.

The expedition lasted from 1802 to 1806, and both Salt and Valentia published accounts of their travels upon their return to Britain in 1809. Valentia did not himself go to the Red Sea, and candidly admitted that one of the primary reasons behind the expedition was to address the 'disgraceful ignorance' within the British government about the Red Sea and the east African coast.⁴³ Valentia indicated that the government was aware of a developing security vacuum in the sea, and a high priority was placed on surveying its principal ports, Suakin, Massawa and Mocha.⁴⁴ He also noted that it would be a favourable time to negotiate commercial treaties with local rulers, as recently 'British naval power had been so fully displayed on the shores of Arabia and Egypt.'⁴⁵

Salt, who actually conducted the expedition to Abyssinia, wrote his own book for the popular press back in London as well as a secret report co-authored with Valentia for the government.⁴⁶ The secret report assessed the opportunities to establish trading networks in the sea as well as potential local military allies and naval stations. The report made it clear that commercial treaties were a means of spreading British influence to counter-act possible French moves into the Red Sea. For example, Valentia wrote; 'I beg leave to observe that the connection with Abyssinia

⁴¹ Deborah Manley and Peta Rée, *Henry Salt: Artist, Traveller, Diplomat, Egyptologist* (Faringdon: Libri Publications, 2001), 8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ George, Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt*, vol. II (London: William Miller, 1809), 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into the Interior of That Country* (London: FC and J Rivington, 1814).

seems to me to be more important in a political than a commercial view since the French have for some time been endeavouring to establish a friendship with the Arab powers.⁴⁷ He cautioned that if sympathetic local powers were not propitiated with gifts of weapons and ammunition, they would inevitably turn to France, potentially undermining Britain's paramount position in the region.⁴⁸



Figure 2: Principal Settlements of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

Principal Settlements [map], 2018. Scale undetermined; generated by James Fargher; using "ScribbleMaps".

⁴⁷ The National Archives, Kew, FO 1/1, Abyssinia – Lord Valentia and Mr. Salt, Observations on the Trade of the Red Sea, n.d.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The secret report also highlighted Aden as a place of rising strategic importance and noted that the local sultan was eager to cultivate good relations with the British on account of an ongoing conflict with the Wahhabis from central Arabia. According to Valentia and Salt, the sultan was willing to accept British protection in return for arms and ammunition to equip his own army. The report urged policymakers to consider extending British political control over Aden as 'his capital seems destined for the mart of the Red Sea trade, and would become the chief station of any establishment the British may wish to form. It is the Gibraltar of the East and at a trifling expense might be made impregnable.'⁴⁹ Salt and Valentia believed that Aden could become the anchor of British naval power in the Red Sea region on account of its position, and British political influence could be extended up both shores of the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. 'Were an alliance formed with the Wahabee [Saudis],' they wrote, 'and the Island of [Kamaran] secured by the English...were Valentia occupied on the other side of the Sea, and the friendship of Abyssinia cultivated, by affording her that assistance which she now requires, the British would acquire that influence which the French are now grasping at, and the Red Sea would be secured against the power of Napoleon, should fortune again give him the control of Egypt.'⁵⁰ Influence, backed up by naval power in the Red Sea, in other words, would be Britain's best guarantee of securing India against any further incursions by the French from the Mediterranean.

Diplomatic Efforts in the Gulf

The increased attention focused on the Red Sea sparked by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt did in fact result some diplomatic efforts by the British government in the region. In early 1827, HMS *Tamar* under Captain Sir Gordon Bremer, RN, was sent to the Somali coast to blockade the port of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Berbera in retribution for the murder of the crew of a wrecked brig.⁵¹ In return for the payment of fines by the local sheikhs, Bremer on behalf of George IV recognised the Hubberanal tribe as the sole legitimate authority of Somaliland.⁵² Pledging perpetual 'peace and friendship' between the Crown and the tribe, the circumstances under which the 1827 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce was signed was intended as a demonstration of British superiority. The treaty would also become the British government's legal justification for refusing to recognise any attempts by foreign powers to establish protectorates over the Somalis later in the century.⁵³

The treaty of 1827 was followed up by a second agreement signed in 1840 between the East India Company and the local Somali tribe which controlled the small port of Zeyla.⁵⁴ According to the instructions issued by the Court of Directors to Captain Robert Morseby of the Indian Navy, the company had received information indicating that an expedition was sailing from Bordeaux with the aim of establishing a French settlement somewhere along the African coast of the Gulf. As the 'settlement of any other European Commercial Agency or Military Station there would prove highly detrimental to British Interests,' Morseby was ordered to sail to Zeyla and to negotiate exclusive trading rights with the local authorities there.⁵⁵ The company instructed Morseby that the 'Commercial Treaty be entered into with the Government of Zeyla, worded in such a manner as to check or exclude any settlement about to be made or already established at that place, or its Vicinity.'⁵⁶ Under these instructions, Morseby successfully negotiated the purchase of the islands outside Zeyla's harbour as well as the right for all British-flagged vessels to enter the port. He subsequently reported to his superiors that he had secured British interests on the Somali coast, and

⁵¹ Gerald Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean: A Study of Maritime Enterprise, 1810 – 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 303.

⁵² The National Archives, Kew, FO 844/1, Various Papers and Documents Relating to the Tribes of the Somali Coast, Articles of Friendship and Commerce, 6 February 1827.

⁵³ Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, 303.

⁵⁴ The National Archives, Kew, FO 844/1, Various Papers and Documents Relating to the Tribes of the Somali Coast, Commercial Treaty, 1840.

⁵⁵ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/13, Secret Department Aden, Instructions to the Commander of the Honourable Company's Vessel of War Touching at Mocha Affairs, Secret Letter from the Political Agent at Aden, 1840.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

had prevented the French ship *Ankobur* from founding a settlement anywhere along the African coast.⁵⁷ Moresby also reported that he had surveyed Zeyla's harbour in anticipation of future visits by British vessels.⁵⁸

These treaties heralded a growing desire by officials in India to deepen Britain's influence over the Somali coastline, given its strategic importance to the connection with Europe. In 1848, Lieutenant C.J. Cruttenden of the Indian Navy was sent to Somaliland in response to reports of fighting between the various coastal tribes.⁵⁹ As he reported back to the Bombay government, which oversaw Somali affairs, he organised and implemented a reconciliation process between the tribes and helped to quell an ongoing inter-tribal war. He did so, he claimed, because Berbera was of strategic importance for India, and it was necessary to ensure the local government in Berbera remained stable and friendly towards British interests.⁶⁰ The government in Bombay approved Cruttenden's mission, and endorsed his measures to keep the peace amongst the coastal tribes.⁶¹ Initially triggered by the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, the British government was clearly becoming increasingly involved in Somali affairs through a series of negotiations and treaties aimed and preventing any resurgence of French naval power in the Red Sea.

⁵⁷ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/13, Secret Department Aden, Instructions to the Commander of the Honourable Company's Vessel of War Touching at Mocha Affairs, Letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 28 August 1840.

⁵⁸ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/13, Secret Department Aden, Instructions to the Commander of the Honourable Company's Vessel of War Touching at Mocha Affairs, Letter from the Political Resident Aden to the Secretary to the Honourable the Secret Committee, 26 August 1840.

⁵⁹ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/32, Political and Secret Department Records, Lieutenant Cruttenden's Report of his proceeding on his late mission to Berbera to make up the difference between the Somali Tribes, January 1848.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/32, Political and Secret Department Records, Government of Bombay to Captain S.B. Haines, January 1848.

Aden

Following on the recommendations made during the Egyptian campaign, the British government negotiated the purchase of Aden from the Sultan of Lahej in 1838 and formally took control of the city in 1839. The acquisition of Aden had been championed by naval and military officers in India since Britain's initial involvement in the Red Sea in the eighteenth century. However, the acquisition of Aden was not undertaken until the advance of Egyptian forces under Muhammed Ali south towards the city along the Arabian coastline during the Egyptian-Ottoman War gave a renewed sense of urgency to previous recommendations.

Ostensibly, efforts to formally seize Aden began in 1838 after the *Daria Dowlat*, a vessel belonging to the Nawab of the Carnatic carrying pilgrims and supplies, was seized by pirates operating from the Yemeni coast, then ruled under the Sultanate of Lahej. The nawab, Ghulam Muhammad Ghouse Khan, as a client of the East India Company was entitled to British protection, and the Bombay government accordingly ordered Commander S.B. Haines of the brig HEICS *Palinurus*, then employed surveying the coast of south Arabia, to proceed to Aden to demand reparations from the sultan.⁶² Haines had previously served between 1820 and 1830 as the Admiralty's chief hydrographer in the Persian Gulf, and following the appointment of Sir Francis Beaufort to the hydrography office in 1830, Haines was chosen to lead the Admiralty's new survey of the Gulf of Aden and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Surveying missions of this type was vital for establishing maritime control over waterways. Indeed, according to his biographer, the survey was launched at the behest of the Indian Government which was then interested in the possibility 'of establishing coal depots at Macullah and the island of Socotra for the line of steamers from Bombay to Suez.'⁶³

⁶² G.E. Walker, *Historical Background of the Royal Indian Navy* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1945), 20.

⁶³ L.S. Dawson, *Memoirs of Hydrography: Brief Biographies of the Principal Officers who have Served in HM Naval Surveying Service* (Eastbourne: Henry W. Keay, 1885), 40.

After arriving at Aden, Haines successfully negotiated an indemnity for the loss of the *Daria Dowlat* and persuaded the sultan to agree to sell the port in return for an annual subsidy. When Company troops arrived to take control of Aden in January 1839 in accordance with the treaty, the sultan attempted to renege on the deal, leading to a bombardment of the city by Company and Royal Navy cruisers which forced Lahej forces to withdraw.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, until 1847 Arab forces repeatedly harassed the city, attempting at various points to retake control of the port after it passed under British control. Haines, who had originally negotiated the sale of the port from the local sultan, became Aden's first governor, a position which he subsequently held for fifteen years.⁶⁵ His appointment demonstrated how close the links between surveying and science, strategy, commerce, and Indian interests could often be in the Red Sea region.

The purchase and subsequent capture of Aden would prove to be a major strategic victory for the British as it provided the first permanent base for naval operations in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Numerous commentators had previously likened the port to a 'Gibraltar of the East', given the area's natural defences and geographic proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Significantly, some of the first actions undertaken by the British government in Aden were surveying the area for the construction of defences. A report compiled for the Bombay government shortly after the city passed into British hands revealed that the only defences in Aden consisted of an old wall built along the strip of land connecting the city with the mainland to protect against landward attacks.⁶⁶ Given the continuing danger posed by the Lahej sultanate to Aden, in April 1839, the Bombay authorities agreed to fund the construction of new defences around the town before ordering that even more extensive measures be taken to defend the port against naval attacks.⁶⁷ The similarities between the fortifications built at Aden and Gibraltar as well as the similar strategic roles

⁶⁴ Walker, *Historical Background of the Royal Indian Navy*, 20.

⁶⁵ Dawson, *Memoirs of Hydrography*, 40.

⁶⁶ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/8, Fortification of Aden, Letter to the Military Secretary of the Government of Bombay, March 1839.

⁶⁷ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/8, Fortification of Aden, Letter to Captain R. Foster, RE, 15 April 1839.

played by both stations led to frequent allusions of Aden being a 'Gibraltar of the East', a phrase which underlined the significance of Aden to Britain's imperial interests in the Indian Ocean.

By May, military officials in Aden had begun focusing almost exclusively on construction coastal defences. The nature of these defences suggest they were constructed to thwart attacks by European warships in those waters rather than local Arab dhows. For example, the proposed defences included kilns for red-hot shot to serve the numerous new batteries planned to face out into the Gulf in addition to new wells and ammunition bunkers reinforced to withstand hits from explosive shells.⁶⁸ These new fortifications were not built to prevent local raids, but rather to defend the port from maritime rivals such as France which had access to the type of ship-mounted artillery capable of bombarding the town.

Like Gibraltar and Malta in the Mediterranean, Aden would become a fortress to support British naval power in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and acted as a Darwinian bridgehead, radiating British influence into the territories surrounding the Red Sea waterway. Governed as part of the Bombay presidency, the British residency in Aden became a persistent source of agitation for the extension of imperial power over the Somali and Sudanese coastlines. As Ashley Jackson noted in his study of the naval station at Mauritius, these posts acted as sources of sub imperialism, urging the annexation of neighbouring territories in order to protect themselves.⁶⁹ A consistent theme of this project will be to demonstrate the important role played by the sub-imperial government in Aden with expanding the frontiers of Empire into northeastern Africa.

Abyssinia

⁶⁸ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E/8, Fortification of Aden, Letter to the Military Secretary of the Government of Bombay, May 1839.

⁶⁹ Ashley Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 17.

Although Valentia and Salt published accounts of their voyages in the east, including a report on the state of Abyssinia and Somalia which was submitted to the government, British interest in the mysterious Christian empire waned with the end of the Napoleonic Wars. When Salt arrived to the court of the Emperor Egwale Seyon, he brought with him presents from George III, the standard gifts given to foreign rulers during diplomatic missions of the time.⁷⁰ According to an official history of British-Ethiopian relations compiled by the War Office, by 1832 the British government was providing small numbers of weapons and ammunition to factions in Abyssinia's internecine civil wars between contenders for the imperial crown.⁷¹ However, the defeat of Napoleon, the capture of the French naval base in Mauritius and the elimination of French settlements in Madagascar saw Britain lose interest in Abyssinia as a possible counterbalance to French power in the western Indian Ocean. With the exception of a small number of weapons shipments, there was no significant diplomatic contact with Abyssinia between 1810 and 1840.⁷² Following his mission to the Red Sea, Henry Salt was appointed His Majesty's Consul-General in Egypt and no further attempts were made to foster an alliance with the Abyssinian emperor in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna.

Diplomatic contacts were not re-established until 1840, when the possibility of war with France again loomed as part of the Oriental Crisis. In that year, the Bombay government organised a diplomatic expedition to be sent to Abyssinia under the command of Sir William Harris, a Royal Engineer serving in the presidency.⁷³ Arriving in 1841, Harris attempted to lay the foundations for a possible alliance or treaty of mutual assistance with the Abyssinians in the event of further conflict with France. Although Harris failed to do so, his mission did lead to the deployment of the first British permanent representative to the Abyssinian court in 1848. By that time, the Abyssinian and

⁷⁰ Major Trevenen Holland, Captain Henry Hozier, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1870), 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷² Charles Beke, *The French and English in the Red Sea* (London: Taylor Francis, 1862), 10.

⁷³ H. Chichester, 'Harris, Sir William Cornwallis (bap. 1897, d. 1848), army officer and traveller,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2017 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-12428>].

Ottoman governments had become locked in a dispute over competing claims to a strip of coastal territory which included the ports of Massawa and Assab, two key harbours along the African shoreline of the Red Sea.⁷⁴ Whilst both empires quarrelled over which claim was legitimate, the coastline had in fact fallen under the control of independent Eritrean tribes. In the midst of this conflict, Walter Plowden, a gentleman explorer, was appointed Her Majesty's permanent consular agent to Abyssinia.⁷⁵ Plowden was tasked with negotiating a commercial treaty with Emperor Tewodros II, a treaty which was ultimately successfully ratified by the British government in 1856. Plowden himself was killed by Muslim rebels whilst attempting to travel to Massawa in 1860, but as his office was now a permanent one, he was replaced by Captain Cameron as the new consul to Tewodros' court.⁷⁶

Cameron reported that Tewodros had a voracious appetite for European arms and ammunition as a result of his ongoing wars to crush rebellions in outlying provinces and to fend off rival claimants to the imperial throne.⁷⁷ After unsuccessfully appealing to Queen Victoria for weapons and never receiving a response, Tewodros infamously imprisoned British diplomatic personnel as well as several missionaries and demanded artillery munitions and trainers as their ransom. The government's response to Tewodros was to despatch the Political Resident in Aden, Lieutenant-Colonel Merewether, to Massawa with weapons and artificers to bargain with the emperor. Merewether reported back to London that he offered to negotiate with Tewodros if the emperor first returned the hostages, and threatened war if he did not.⁷⁸ Merewether also apparently claimed to Tewodros that 'up till now, England prevented Egypt from making war on

⁷⁴ Beke, *The French and English in the Red Sea*, 9.

⁷⁵ H. Chichester, 'Harris, Sir William Cornwallis (bap. 1897, d. 1848), army officer and traveller,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2017 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-12428>].

⁷⁶ Holland & Hozier, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia*, 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 18.

Abyssinia, but, at soon as your Majesty forces England to go to war, it could not prevent Egypt from doing the same'.⁷⁹

Merewether's threat raises several interesting questions regarding Britain's position in the Red Sea. Firstly, it is not at all clear whether the British government had pressured Egypt to refrain from attacking Abyssinia. Given Britain's lukewarm and inconsistent interest in Abyssinia, it appears doubtful that strenuous diplomatic efforts had been made to dissuade Cairo from making war on its southern Christian neighbour. However, if Merewether's statement was fully or partially true, it would imply that Britain was interested in maintaining a stable and balanced political settlement in the Red Sea where, as a result of the unchallenged status of the East Indies Squadron in the waterway, its influence was paramount.

As it was, Tewodros refused Merewether's offer and retreated to his mountain fortress of Magdala with the hostages. By 1867 Tewodros had lost control over most of his empire and his authority was rapidly shrinking to the walls of Magdala itself. The traditional narrative of the subsequent 1868 Abyssinian Expedition is one of a triumphal feat of arms by a small army operating deep in hostile and unknown territory. However, the decision to launch an expedition in 1868 was also an indication of how deeply involved in Abyssinian politics the British had become. To be sure, the official chroniclers of the campaign made it clear that the government decided to take action to release the hostages, stating,

Her Majesty's Government were thus forced to the conclusion that King Theodore rejected the friendly advances of this country, and declined to comply with the demands of the Queen, that her officers, whom he had detained in captivity, should be released. Under these circumstances, Her Majesty's Government, who had exhausted all peaceful efforts, resolved to resort to force.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.

It is noteworthy that within fifty years of Henry Salt's first visit to the empire, Britain had escalated its diplomatic presence from occasional visits to a permanent consulship to a full-blown military intervention to topple a head of state. By 1868, Britain had assumed the appearance of regional power-broker, with a regional diplomatic presence backed by the firepower of its cruisers stationed in Aden and its troops in India. In her assessment of the role of India in the development of British foreign policy in the nineteenth century, Mahajan explicitly tied the Abyssinian expedition to the defence of the new Suez-Bombay sea route. According to her analysis, both the pressure of domestic politics as well as strategy lay behind the expedition – 'The ready approval of Parliament and the press had much to do with the strategic importance of this state on the route to India'.⁸¹ At the very least, the decision to launch an attack against Ethiopia does suggest that the British government was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in order to preserve British diplomatic pre-eminence in the region.

In order to rescue the hostages, a fleet transported troops from India to the African coastline in 1868. Under the command of Sir Robert Napier, the relief column marched 400 miles from the coast into the Ethiopian interior and successfully stormed Magdala, liberating the prisoners and razing the fortress. At the request of the India Office, a team of scientists including a geographer from the Royal Geographical Society, a meteorologist, and several geologists were included the expedition, tasked with gathering as much information as possible on the country and to produce accurate maps of the area.⁸² The expedition would thus provide the British government with intelligence potentially useful for further involvement in Abyssinia.

Although Napier and his troops were withdrawn without leaving behind a garrison or any other official permanent presence, the expedition established a legacy of British military interventions in the states of Red Sea littoral whenever Britain's strategic interests were threatened.

⁸¹ Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy, 1874 – 1914*, 35.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 357, 370.

In her overview of British and Italian diplomatic relations in the Red Sea, Agatha Ramm identified the 1868 Abyssinian expedition as end of the 'Palmerstonian' era of British policy in the region, the strategy of maintaining supremacy by cultivating a network of weak, neutral satellites.⁸³ As will be discussed in later chapters, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 Britain did indeed begin retreating from its traditional strategy of dominance through prestige, eventually withdrawing recognition of smaller tribes and polities in the region in favour of the rising Egyptian empire. In that sense, the expedition was, as Ramm argued, the watershed between the Palmerstonian and Gladstonian approaches to the Red Sea, as well as the forerunner of the military deployments to Sudan and Sudan which laid the foundations for British imperial rule in these areas.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that British interest in the Red Sea began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. Previously, the natural geography of the sea had nullified its potential as a strategic asset and the waterway remained a largely unexplored backwater. French control over Egypt, however, threatened to hand Napoleon the power of transporting revolutionary armies down with the prevailing winds through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and into the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Royal Navy's stranglehold over the Strait of Gibraltar. This was a maritime threat to Britain's Indian interests, and the military in India responded to the French threat by sending ships and troops to the region and attempting to seize control of Perim.

Even after the French were driven out of Egypt, the memory of that threat led to several diplomatic initiatives to build British influence in the region as a bulwark against further attempts on Egypt and India. These led to a lasting political interest in Somaliland, the annexation of Aden, and a recurring, if inconsistent, relationship with Abyssinia. Henry Salt's expedition to Abyssinia sent to

⁸³ Ramm, 'Great Britain and the Planting of Italian Power in the Red Sea, 1868-1885', 213.

counter potential French influence during the war with Napoleon led to further involvement in the country, including the expedition of 1868 which in turn became the forerunner of other military interventions in the region in the 1880s.

The origins of British imperialism in northeastern Africa can be found during this period when officials scrambled to respond the apparent threat posed by French forces in Egypt. It was in 1799 that the first annexation of territory to guard against feared French expansion was attempted, and although it failed, it led directly to the identification of Aden as the suitable location for a naval base. As the threat from France ebbed and flowed during the course of the nineteenth century, so did British attention to the Red Sea. The following chapters will chart the development of a strategic school of thought which justified the seizure of African territory in the name of national defence, as well as the evolution of Britain's approach to securing its interests in northeastern Africa over the course of the nineteenth century. The result by 1899 was the imposition of a large and formal empire across much of the region, the foundation for which had been laid a century previously.

Chapter II

Introduction

In order to understand fully the context in which British military and political expansion took place in the territories of the Red Sea region, it is necessary to observe first how British grand strategy evolved during the middle of the nineteenth century. Following its initial involvement in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden during the Napoleonic Wars, growing British interest in the waterway coincided with the rise of the so-called imperial defence school of strategic thought which developed in the aftermath of international diplomatic crises between the 1840s and 1860s. Throughout the long eighteenth century Britain had fought as a Great Power in its own right, but by the latter half of the nineteenth it was becoming clear that Britain needed the Empire to buttress its continued status as global power in the face of rising challenges from other industrial powers. Colonial territories would become a source of national strength rather than a reflection of it. Unable to match the armies mustered by the continental powers, Britain began withdrawing garrisons from the distant colonies of settlement. Theorists of imperial defence promised that the Empire could be guarded by mastery of the world's oceans at a much-reduced cost, and colonies were offered guarantees of protection through naval deterrence.

As well as a reaction to changes in the world order, this evolution in the security relationship between Britain and the Empire was also a result of technological innovations in transport and communication which were taking place by the mid-nineteenth century. The liberation of ships from the tyranny of wind and the growth of an imperial telegraph network allowed far-flung territories, fleets, and armies to be integrated into a single oceanic imperial system, centrally-coordinated by the government in London. However, the integrity of the security architecture propounded by supporters of imperial defence depended upon secure lines of communication for

both telegraph wires and for the movement of the Royal Navy's scattered fleets. Telegraph wires could be laid along the bottom of the sea to protect them from interception, but the new coal-burning warships being launched required regular points at which to refuel.

The transition to an imperial defence strategy thus led to an increasing interest in securing the lines of communication which connected Britain with the Empire. This including safeguarding natural geographic chokepoints, such as the Strait of Gibraltar, and building chains of coaling stations and naval bases around the world between which warships could steam. After the opening of the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden became an important communication route to the empire in Asia, augmenting the traditional route around the Cape of Good Hope. In fact, the more Britain turned towards an imperial defence strategy, the more forces it deployed to the Red Sea, and the more attention Whitehall paid to affairs in northeastern Africa.

This chapter will highlight the transition in British strategy towards a coherent system of imperial defence by the 1880s and 1890s. It will explore the contributions of strategic thinkers such as the Colomb brothers and Royal Engineers like Sir William Jervois and Sir Andrew Clarke who helped to persuade British policymakers to adopt a system of imperial defence. This strategic pivot led to greater British interest in the Red Sea region and was later incorporated into the theory of maritime strategy developed by Sir Julian Corbett. Prevailing attitudes in mid-Victorian Britain, such as an aversion to spending public funds on colonial garrisons and the growing realisation that Britain could not defend its colonial North American border from the United States, also helped to usher in the transition to a defence strategy based on naval deterrence rather than land power. The adoption of a naval-based policy of imperial defence naturally focused British strategists' attention on the waterways which linked Britain with the Empire, including the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

France and the Origins of Imperial Defence

In the wake of the Battle of Trafalgar and Napoleon's final fall at Waterloo in 1815, the Royal Navy appeared to reign supreme. But despite Britain's victory in the war against Napoleon and the dominance of the Royal Navy, by as early as 1830 traditional British fears of French invasion had begun to resurface.¹ Although the Bourbons had been restored to the throne of France by the victorious Allied powers in 1814, by 1830 the reactionary Charles X had become deeply unpopular in Britain. His attempts to control the press and to suppress civil liberties outraged public opinion,² and under his reign France pursued an aggressive foreign policy aimed at shutting Britain out from the Levant.³ Charles began to align France with Russia, aiming to redraw the map of Europe as agreed upon by the Congress of Vienna. In 1829 Charles even asked the Russians for their support in a planned annexation of Belgium.⁴ Control over the Scheldt would give France access to a sheltered deep-water port on the Channel, and for centuries a key feature of Britain's European policy had been to keep French warships out of Antwerp. By threatening to upset the balance of power in both northern Europe as well as the Mediterranean through his invasion of Algiers in 1830, Charles revealed either his deep personal hostility towards Britain, or that of his country.⁵

Tensions eased somewhat following Charles' fall in the July Revolution of 1830 which brought the Anglophile Louis Philippe to the French throne. Louis was popular in Britain due to his liberal politics, and his accession was hailed by the British government as a sign of the spread of liberalism in Europe.⁶ In the hope of improving relations with France still further, in 1839 the government agreed to return Napoleon's body to France. This proved to be a badly miscalculated

¹ Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 47.

² 1822 Law upon the Press, in Vincent Bleach, *Charles X of France, His Life and Times* (Boulder, Pruett Publishing, 1971).

³ Bleach, *Charles X of France*, 233.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁶ Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: the French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (London: William Heinemann, 2006), 336.

move on the part of the British government, however, as the arrival of Napoleon's body from St. Helena resulted in ugly demonstrations of vitriolic patriotism in Paris which stirred up public hostility towards 'perfidious Albion'.⁷

The awkward rift also occurred at the worst possible time, as both France and Britain were embroiled in a diplomatic crisis in the Middle East over Syria.⁸ Muhammad Ali, the first self-declared Pasha of Egypt, had moved against his liege lord, the Ottoman Sultan, in 1831 demanding that the autonomous Ottoman province of Egypt should be given control of Syria as well. Ali had successfully pressed his claim with military force and captured Syria in the First Turco-Egyptian War in 1833, and the Ottomans were now eager for another round of fighting.⁹ But the second war against Egypt also went badly for the Ottomans, who invaded Syria with an army which was destroyed by the Egyptians in 1839. With the death of the sultan and the defection of the imperial navy to Alexandria, the empire seemed close to disintegration.

The French public was broadly pro-Egyptian and the memory of Napoleon's epic invasion of Egypt in 1798 remained very much alive.¹⁰ So when news arrived that Britain and Austria had moved military forces to contain Ali on behalf of the Ottomans and to demand an end to the conflict, demonstrations erupted in Paris calling for war with Britain.¹¹ The Syrian Crisis was ultimately resolved in late 1840 in Britain's favour by aggressive naval action, much to the fury of France, where the outcome was described by the French poet and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine as 'the Waterloo of French diplomacy.'¹²

The two governments moved to repair relations the following year, but after a brief period, tensions were again raised in 1844 by the Pritchard Affair in Tahiti, in which a British missionary was

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ P.E. Caquet, 'The Napoleonic Legend and the War Scare of 1840,' *The International History Review* 35:4 (2013), 702.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 704.

¹¹ Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 336.

¹² Alphonse de Lamartine, quoted in Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 337.

expelled from the island by a French captain who declared Tahiti to be a French protectorate.¹³ In 1840, Britain and France also clashed over Spain, supporting rival monarchical factions.¹⁴ In December 1846, Palmerston even went so far as to declare to the Cabinet that, 'there is close to our shores a nation of 34,000,000 of people, the leading portion of which, it cannot be denied, is animated with a feeling of deep hatred to England as a power,'¹⁵ indicating how far relations had deteriorated.

To make matters worse, Louis Philippe's downfall two years later in the Revolution of 1848 brought Napoleon's heir, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, to power – first as President of the Second Republic, and then in 1851, as Emperor of the Second Empire. The revolution and the return of a Bonaparte once again raised the spectre of French invasion, especially as it was believed by Britain's leading statesmen that Napoleon III shared his namesake's hostility towards England.¹⁶

Worsening relations with France coincided with a major advance in naval technology which appeared to threaten the supremacy of the Royal Navy. Robert Fulton, the renowned American engineer, had written to the gentleman scientist Lord Stanhope as early as 1793 informing him that he had discovered a method for propelling a ship by steam.¹⁷ Although similar attempts to harness new developments in steampower with naval architecture had been proposed during the eighteenth century, Fulton proved to be a pioneer in creating the world's first commercially-viable steamship.¹⁸ This development led initially to anxiety amongst leading experts in the 1830s and 1840s that steamships could open the way for hostile European powers to land armies on the English coast.¹⁹ As one historian of this period has noted,

¹³ Ibid., 343.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Palmerston, quoted in George Wrottesley, *Life and Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir John Burgoyne, Bart.* vol. I (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1873), 436

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ H.W. Dickinson, *Robert Fulton: Engineer and Artist, His Life and Works* (London: John Lane, 1913), 23.

¹⁸ Ibid., 218.

¹⁹ Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age*, 47.

beginning about 1830 and becoming conspicuous by 1839, the obsession grew among the English that the introduction of the steam warship and the steam transport enabled a hostile France suddenly to hurl a huge army upon the defenceless English coast without regard to wind or weather.²⁰

In an age before radar, under certain circumstances an invading force could, in theory at least, materialise on the coast without warning. It was impossible for the navy to monitor every mile of the British coastline, and steamships could cross the Channel in a matter of hours, even with a contrary wind or tide. Steam, Palmerston declared, had 'thrown a bridge across the Channel.'²¹ The construction of a large, fortified naval dockyard in Cherbourg²² and the growth of the French navy to near-parity in 1840 appeared to confirm suspicions about French intentions.²³

The British government's response to France (and later the United States) developed the blueprints of what would later become a general strategy of imperial defence; the fortification of dockyards to resist raids from cruisers and opportunistic landings, and the creation of an offensive battlefleet designed to carry out devastating coastal bombardments and impose economic blockades. Unable to compete with continental powers militarily, Britain's strategy to defend the Home Islands and the colonies would rest on the threat of naval counterattack.

Fortifications At Home

As tensions with France rose, British military planners initially focused on the lack of fortifications along the English coastline, which had been left largely undefended due to the Royal Navy's superiority over maritime foes. In 1844 Parliament commissioned the first investigation of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Daniel Baugh, 'Book Review: Anglo French Naval Rivalry, 1840-1870,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27:1 (Summer 1996), 123.

²³ Michael Stephen Partridge, *Military Planning for the Defense of the United Kingdom, 1814-1870* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989), 23.

Britain's coastal defences, which found that the obsolescent state of the fortifications around the naval dockyards at Sheerness, Tilbury, and Pembroke left the harbours effectively undefended, and those around Plymouth and Portsmouth were little better.²⁴ It recommended the urgent installation of floating batteries to improve the situation whilst permanent shore fortifications were constructed to defend these vital naval stations as well as the Thames at Tilbury.²⁵

Following this commission, in November 1846 Sir Jon Burgoyne, Inspector-General of Fortifications, issued a report demanding a comprehensive programme of fortifications around the principal docks of the southern English coast. Titled 'Observations on the possible Results of a War with France under our present system of Military Preparation', the Burgoyne's report recommended that defensive works be constructed at key naval dockyards.²⁶ It received the full backing of Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, who announced to Cabinet that there was a distinct risk that the French would be capable of transporting 'twenty to thirty thousand men...[in] one single night' to attack the English coast.²⁷ It was also endorsed by the venerated Duke of Wellington, who wrote to Burgoyne expressing his concerns about the threat posed by France.²⁸

However, Palmerston was only able to realise his vision when he assumed the premiership for a second time in 1859 and convened the Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom. The commission's purpose was to commit the government to building a set of massive fortifications around key naval resources along the south coast.²⁹ Having emerged victorious from the Crimean War, these reflected Britain's experience in that war during which ships needed to be freed from dockyard protection and redeployed to bombardment missions along the Russian coast.

²⁴ Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 11.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wrottesley, *Life and Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir John Burgoyne, Bart.*, 434.

²⁷ Ibid., 438.

²⁸ Ibid., 445.

²⁹ Timothy Crick, *Ramparts of Empire: The Fortifications of Sir William Jervois Royal Engineer, 1821-1897* (Exeter: The Exeter Press, 2012), 49.

The recommendations subsequently delivered by the commission in 1860 proposed raising integrated defensive works around the key naval bases at Plymouth, Portsmouth and Chatham, and on the approaches to the Isle of Wight and the Thames Estuary.³⁰ The famous Palmerston Forts, which still stand, were designed to provide all-round fire support and to guard ports from flanking attacks by land. They represented a substantial investment in ensuring that the Royal Navy would be able to fully utilise its warfighting assets on the high seas or off the enemy coast without having to station ships for harbour defence.³¹ By denying the enemy access to any major ports which would be necessary to sustain an invasion and occupation of the British homeland, the fortifications ensured that the navy could deploy its full strength abroad rather than carrying out basic defensive coastal operations. As Lord Hartington, Palmerston's under-secretary of War,³² remarked to the House of Commons in 1863, 'the Commission...came to the conclusion that it would be useless to fortify the coast to a distance of three hundred miles in order to prevent invasion...when it was perfectly possible...that an attack might be made...for the purpose of destroying our dockyards.'³³ But by fortifying these points, 'the enemy would be compelled to bring with them a heavy siege train' – an unrealistic prospect for an amphibious assault mounted by any second-rank, mid-nineteenth century maritime power.

The constraints on British resources, however, meant that proposals to raise fortifications of similar size and complexity abroad were out of the question. Britain simply did not have the money

³⁰ Michael Stephen Partridge, *Military Planning for the Defense of the United Kingdom, 1814-1870* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989), 96.

³¹ 'Cliffe Fort,' Victorian Forts, accessed 14 June 2016, <http://www.victorianforts.co.uk/pdf/datasheets/cliffe.pdf>.

³² Jonathan Parry, 'Cavendish, Spencer Compton, Marquess of Hartington and eighth duke of Devonshire (1833–1908)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32331>, accessed 14 June 2016]

³³ Lord Hartington, Speech to the House of Commons, 9 July 1863, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 172 (1863), 452.

or the troops required to garrison the large numbers of fortresses which would be needed abroad should London attempt to defend each imperial territory from landward assaults.

This message was hammered home by the experience of the US Civil War, during which diplomatic quarrels between Britain and the United States threatened to ignite another Anglo-American conflict. The British had long been aware that in the event of an invasion of the British North American colonies by the United States, the individual colonial militia could not hope to stand out for long, even with the support of a regular garrison.³⁴ The massive field armies raised by the Americans during the war dwarfed the token force of 8,000 British regulars stationed in Canada.³⁵ Recognising this fact, since the 1840s London had tried to reduce the size of the garrison deployed to North America (and the burden of paying for it, which was deeply unpopular with voters).³⁶ Edward Cardwell, appointed Colonial Secretary by Palmerston in 1864, was tasked with withdrawing regular troops and organising a united Canadian federation in its place which would represent a more significant diplomatic obstacle to the US should Washington mount a third attempt to conquer the recalcitrant loyalists.³⁷

Cardwell had previous experience from the Colonial Office in the 1830s where he helped to implement the withdrawal from New Zealand as part of a programme of encouraging 'colonial maturity'.³⁸ When overseeing negotiations for the formation of a British North American union, he rejected requests from the colonists to construct a series of fortifications along the frontier with the

³⁴ Burgoyne, quoted in Richard Preston, *The Defence of the Undefended Border: Planning for War in North America, 1867-1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 27.

³⁵ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1967), 252.

³⁶ Edward Beasley, *Empire as the Triumph of Theory: Imperialism, information and the Colonial Society of 1868* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 2.

³⁷ Brian Bond, 'Cardwell, Edward, first Viscount Cardwell (1813-1886)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4620, accessed 22 June 2016] Edward Cardwell (1813-1886): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/4620

³⁸ Ibid.

US, noting that these proposals were simply not practicable.³⁹ Instead, Cardwell offered the new Governor-General the essence of what would become imperial defence strategy, the pledge that attacks would be deterred by the offensive capabilities of the Royal Navy. Writing to assure the Canadians, Cardwell pledged that whilst no border fortifications would be built, Britain was committed to “defending every portion of the Empire with all of the resources at its command.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Cardwell was the first person in Parliament to be recorded using the term ‘imperial defence.’⁴¹

Ruling out the possibility of constructing fortifications in Canada, the British demonstrated the second element to the country’s global strategy. Freed from coastline protection duties along the Channel, the navy’s command of the world’s oceans would be used to protect vital national interests. Born out of necessity, this approach maximised existing advantages whilst recognising the limits of Britain’s resources. ‘Her global empire could not be secured against serious attack by local defences...this was a matter of basic economics and political expedience.’⁴² Aggressive Russian expansionism in central Asia towards the border with India between the 1860s and 1870s reinforced this point,⁴³ as the garrison in India and the potentially mutinous native armies were not expected to hold out indefinitely against a sustained Russian assault. Besides, the real value of the Victorian empire was in its informal domination and influence over lucrative regions such as South America and its ready access to trade and markets, all of which depended upon maritime trade.⁴⁴

³⁹ W.L. Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873* (London: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1964), 282.

⁴⁰ Cardwell to Monck, quoted in *ibid*.

⁴¹ Edward Cardwell, Speech to the House of Commons, 16 March 1865, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 177 (1865), 1824.

⁴² Andrew Lambert, ‘The Royal Navy and the defence of empire, 1856-1918,’ in *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order 1856-1956*, ed. Greg Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2008), 115.

⁴³ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198.

⁴⁴ Lambert, ‘The Royal Navy and the defence of empire, 1856-1918,’ 112.

Maritime Defences Abroad

Whilst the British were incapable of defending their empire with armies, advances in naval technology during the mid-nineteenth century amplified the Royal Navy's advantages over its rivals. The navy had embraced the potential utility of steam-powered vessels, and by 1837 it had acquired some 27 of them.⁴⁵ The navy had also opened its first engineering branch, the Steam Machinery and Packet Department, headquartered in Somerset House in the same year.⁴⁶

During the Crimean War, the navy demonstrated its potential to mount close in shore support missions to advancing troops, and, more importantly to carry out strategic bombardments of enemy ports and cities. By adopting plans previously drawn up to counter the French fortifications at Cherbourg, a British fleet equipped with long-range artillery, rockets, and mortars successfully silenced the forts guarding Helsinki harbour in 1855.⁴⁷ The implications were clear: the navy could strike at any major port with potentially strategic results. Furthermore, the navy also orchestrated the formation of supply-lines to transport coal from the British Isles to distant theatres in the Baltic and the Black seas, showcasing its significant operational reach.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of the war, the French initially appeared to have stolen a march by launching the world's first ocean going, steam-propelled ironclad, *La Gloire*, in 1859.⁴⁹ However, the Royal Navy responded by launching two new revolutionary ironclads of its own, HMS *Warrior* in 1860 and *Black Prince* in 1861. Indeed, in 1861 all operational ships in the navy had steam engines

⁴⁵ Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 12.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Penn, *"Up Funnel, Down Screw!": The Story of the Naval Engineer* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955), 14.

⁴⁷ Andrew Lambert, *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia, 1853-1856* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 303.

⁴⁸ Andrew Lambert, *Battleships in Transition: The Creation of the Steam Battlefleet 1815-1860* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1984), 62.

⁴⁹ Stanley Sandler, *Battleships: An Illustrated History of Their Impact* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 22.

installed, increasing the navy's strategic mobility, although with the consequence that the fleet would become heavily dependent on coal depots.⁵⁰

The navy also recognised the potential of steam-powered cruisers for a traditional *guerre de course* against civilian shipping, the lifeblood of Britain's maritime interests. After observing the cruise of the CSS *Alabama*, a steam-powered gun-vessel constructed in Liverpool on behalf of the rebel Confederacy which succeeded in capturing 60 prizes and causing \$6,000,000 worth of damage to Union shipping,⁵¹ the navy's new Surveyor, Edward John Reed, cancelled all orders for unarmoured screw frigates and instead began concentrating on building up the fleet's cruiser capabilities.⁵² News that the United States had laid down new fast long-ranged cruisers, the *Wampanoag*-class which were designed to hunt down civilian ships and to mount lightning raids,⁵³ Reed launched several new types of iron-hulled cruisers to counter the threat: initially the *Inconstant* class, followed in 1867 by *Volage*, and *Shah* in 1873.⁵⁴

Whilst it was once customary to refer to the 1860s and the 1870s as a 'Dark Age' for the Royal Navy, the wide array of new classes of warships being developed demonstrated the navy's flexibility in addressing emerging threats from Britain's maritime rivals. In addition to bombardment ships to be used in European conflicts, the navy also successfully produced warships designed to intercept new classes of commerce raiders such as the *Alabama*.⁵⁵ Britain had effectively contained the threats posed by France and the United States to the navy's mastery over the Atlantic and had acquired the maritime capabilities which would eventually be reorganised into a comprehensive 'Imperial' strategy.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁵¹ Captain Bedford Pim, Speech to the House of Commons, 19 March 1877, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 233 (1877), 136.

⁵² Norman Friedman, *British Cruisers of the Victorian Era* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 76.

⁵³ Lance C. Buhl, 'Mariners and Machines: Resistance to Technological Change in the American Navy, 1865-1869,' *The Journal of American History* 61:3 (December 1974), 703.

⁵⁴ David Lyon and Rif Winfield, *The Sail & Steam Navy List: All the Ships of the Royal Navy 1815-1889* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2004), 248.

⁵⁵ Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 156.

Intellectual Anxiety and the Philosophy of Decline

Although the Royal Navy successfully adapted to changing international circumstances and naval technology, by the mid-Victorian period a sense of anxiety had nevertheless crept into the British intellectual class that the underpinnings beneath the nation's status as leading world power were beginning to erode. Between the 1840s and the 1860s, some of Britain's most influential philosophers and polemicists issued veiled warnings about the nation's future and about the fleeting nature of power. Allusions to the Classical past and the fall of Rome appeared increasingly frequently throughout their best-selling books, and a common fixation on decline threaded their works. The discoveries of Charles Darwin were interpreted by many to indicate that whole peoples and cultures could face extinction should they fail to compete effectively with others.

This growing sense of national insecurity in the mid-Victorian period was significant because it was the intellectual milieu in which the statesmen and strategists of the 1870s and 1880s were steeped. Far from being confined to obscure university common rooms, the leading Victorian philosophers preoccupied with decline were highly-regarded, well-connected members of the British governing elite. Thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, and Herbert Spencer all enjoyed close connections with Cabinet ministers and the aristocracy. Though ponderous and didactic, their studies on philosophy, history and biology inculcated the next generation of political and military men with warnings about retaining the *status quo*.

As early as 1843, for example, Carlyle warned that 'England is dying of inanition',⁵⁶ whilst on the other side of the continent Russia was 'drilling all wild Asia and wild Europe into military rank

⁵⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Robson and Sons, 1870 ed., 1843), 3.

and file, a terrible yet hitherto prospering enterprise'.⁵⁷ His friend Ruskin echoed this call, arguing that Britain was facing 'national destruction' due to a perceived decay in the nation's moral fibres caused by greed and social inequality.⁵⁸

Similarly, James Stephen, whilst serving as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, delivered his acclaimed *Lectures on the History of France*, which left his audience in no doubt that the pursuit of 'heartless luxuries' was the root cause of France's decline and fall.⁵⁹ His successor, Charles Kingsley, continued to reiterate this message, arguing that corruption, immorality and profligacy would lead to decay and collapse, as in 'Greece, in Rome, in Spain, in China, and many other lands.'⁶⁰ The wretched state of contemporary China in particular, believed Kingsley, demonstrated most forcefully 'that as the prosperity of a nation is the correlative of their morals, so are their morals the correlative of their theology'.⁶¹ Herbert Spencer's work on race theory and competition lent a scientific veneer to concerns over racial and national decline, which could, according to Spencer, affect even those on the top of the racial hierarchy.⁶²

These ideas being propounded by the nation's leading intellectuals were by no means fringe and they represented the framework in which Britain's governing classes formulated British grand strategy for the remainder of the century. Not only were Spencer's works widely published, for example, but he was counted amongst the small circle of elite figures who led the country, the holders of high government office and the socially-connected intelligentsia. Amongst those who wrote to Spencer requesting copies of his works were Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the Colonial Secretary;⁶³ Edward Stanley, the 15th Earl of Derby, twice Foreign and Colonial Secretary;⁶⁴ James

⁵⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁸ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1860, 1872 edn.), 42.

⁵⁹ James Stephen, *Lectures on the History of France* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1875), 20.

⁶⁰ Charles Kingsley, *The Limits of Exact Science As Applied to History* (Cambridge: MacMillan and Co., 1860), 54.

⁶¹ Ibid., 59.

⁶² Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, vol. I (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 189.

⁶³ Senate House Library, Herbert Spencer Papers, MS791/25, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton to Herbert Spencer, letter, 2 April 1851.

⁶⁴ Senate House Library, Herbert Spencer Papers, MS791/46, Lord Stanley to Herbert Spencer, letter, 1 February 1860.

Anthony Froude, the noted historian;⁶⁵ John Stuart Mill;⁶⁶ and William Gladstone.⁶⁷ Indeed, Gladstone remarked in one of his responses to Spencer that 'I shall think it a great advantage to become acquainted with your views in this connected forum'. Carlyle, Ruskin, Stephen, and Kingsley similarly enjoyed elite social connections

All of these indicators point to a general anxiety about decline and eclipse, written and propounded when Britain basked in the apotheosis of its power. Though not military men or strategic thinkers, these highly influential authors evidently reflected a growing concern over Britain's future as the world's predominant power. In so doing, they set the stage the mid-century strategic thinkers who presented a military and imperial Greater Britain as the solution to preserving Britain's status in the face of growing competition from hegemonic rivals.

Colomb and Imperial Defence

The man to first present a coherent imperial strategy was a Royal Marine artilleryman, John Colomb. After graduating from the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth in 1854, Colomb had joined the Royal Marine Artillery and was promoted a captain in 1867.⁶⁸ Blessed with financial independence, in 1869 he retired to become the adjutant of the artillery militia in Cork and in 1886 he was elected to Parliament.⁶⁹ Colomb was the brother of Vice-Admiral Philip Colomb, who rose to

⁶⁵ Senate House Library, Herbert Spencer Papers, MS791/46, J.A. Froude to Herbert Spencer, letter, 16 March 1860.

⁶⁶ Senate House Library, Herbert Spencer Papers, MS791/63, J.S. Mill to Herbert Spencer, letter, 30 July 1861.

⁶⁷ Senate House Library, Herbert Spencer Papers, MS791/88, William Gladstone to Herbert Spencer, letter, 13 November 1873.

⁶⁸ John F. Beeler, 'Colomb, Sir John Charles Ready (1838–1909)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32510>, accessed 12 July 2016].

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

prominence after publishing an account of his service as captain of HMS *Dryad*, an anti-slaving cruiser off the East African coast.⁷⁰

Colomb, a strategic visionary, pioneered the concept of imperial defence at a time when much of the British military establishment was still committed to the construction of fortresses as the key to preserving British power. He differed from many of his naval contemporaries who championed the construction of coast defence battleships and floating batteries to defend harbours.⁷¹ Instead, Colomb was the first strategic thinker to envision the integration of the navy and the army into a global blue-water rapid response force, where ships steamed between chains of fortified naval bases and could land troops quickly in amphibious operations. This form of amphibious deterrence, similar versions of which had been used by other historical sea-based empires, would defend a globe-spanning Empire.

In 1867, Colomb published a short book titled *The Protection of Our Commerce and Distribution of Our Naval Forces Considered*. He began by establishing two guiding principles; the classic strategic imperative to concentrate forces at vital points, and noting that Britain was dependant on the world's maritime trade routes to preserve its financial, and thus national, power:

We know that on the proper distribution of our forces depends the safety of these innumerable vessels, and that this involves the prosperity, nay, the very existence, of the British empire in time of war. It is in reality the income of the nation which is thus scattered broadcast over the ocean.⁷²

Colomb recognised that 'upon the freedom of communication the commercial existence of the empire depends,' and that 'from this point of view, the greatest calamity which can befall this

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² John Colomb, *The Protection of Our Commerce and Distribution of Our Naval Forces Considered* (London: Harrison, 1867), 2.

gigantic enterprize is that pressure from without which would threaten to cut off the greatest number of its communications.’⁷³

Accordingly, Colomb believed that to secure these vital trade routes, Britain had to take active steps to seize ports and territories along them to preserve them from interception by hostile rivals. For example, in regard to South Africa he wrote, ‘the greater portion of the wealth of the empire passes round the Cape of Good Hope. We must therefore defend not only that point, but all intervening stations, on either side, and by a line of detached ports afford safety to our traders.’⁷⁴ His strategic thinking welded navy and imperialism together: it made security of Britain’s maritime links dependent upon ensuring vital ports and territory could not be used by rival forces as points of interception.

Indeed, when Colomb elaborated upon his vision by drawing up a comprehensive plan for defending the empire, he called for the establishment of chains of stations along these sea lines of communication to solidify British control over them. ‘In our possession, occupying the central position of each station, affording direct and rapid communication with England, and having natural advantages to render it capable of defence, and of being not only a depot for war forces, but also a refuge for our traders in time of war, on their outward and homeward voyages.’⁷⁵ In effect, these chains of naval bases promised to replace the old convoy system by providing protection for merchantmen leapfrogging from one base to the next. With cruiser squadrons permanently assigned to each station, the navy would become gatekeepers along each trade route, effectively deciding which nations could access the global trading commons and which could not. At the same time, British cruisers assigned to these stations could hunt down and destroy enemy raiders in time of war attempting to wage *guerre de course* against British commerce and to impose their own economic blockades on hostile shorelines.

⁷³ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 18.

Colomb also raised two points which would be vital for Britain in future wars. The first was the question of coal. In 1873 the Royal Navy launched the first mastless capital ship, HMS *Devastation*, which could travel for a maximum distance of 6,400 miles without needing to refuel, a radius of action of 3,000.⁷⁶ The fleet was rapidly becoming dependent upon coal supplies. Therefore, overseas bases had to stockpile large amounts of coal with which steam warships could refuel and these stockpiles had to be secured by 'local defence' to prevent them being seized by marauding enemy cruisers.⁷⁷ As Colomb wrote:

It is of the utmost importance that the coal depots abroad should be effectually guarded; but the employment of sea-going ships for this purpose would have the effect of limiting their field of action to the prejudice of a large area.⁷⁸

Army units and local militia should be used to defend the bases and their coal supplies, argued Colomb, in order to free up more ships on the station for operations in surrounding waters. This would liberate them from tedious garrison duty, and permit them to be employed in blue-water operations.

Colomb's ideas sparked an evolution in strategic thinking in London about Britain's grand strategy, away from 'colonial defence' towards a concept of an interconnected imperial world system.⁷⁹ As Colomb pointed out, only India and Canada could be attacked by land, and therefore securing the lines of communication between the fleets of the Royal Navy was more important to defending the Empire as a whole. To be sure, at this point in his career Colomb did not hold public office, and his first publication was not widely read by the British military establishment.⁸⁰ His idea of imperial defence only began gaining traction when on 28 June 1873 he delivered an address to the

⁷⁶ Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 159.

⁷⁷ Colomb, *Protection of Our Commerce and Distribution of Our Naval Forces Considered*, 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁹ John Beeler, 'Steam, strategy and Schurman: imperial defence in the post-Crimean era, 1856-1905,' *In Far Flung Lines: Essays on Imperial Defence in Honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman*, ed. Greg Kennedy and Keith Neilson, 27-54 (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 32.

⁸⁰ Donald MacKenzie Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*, ed. John Beeler (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 27.

Royal Colonial Institute in which he presented his vision of an imperial defence strategy. During his speech, Colomb argued that future hegemonic wars between Britain and her rivals would involve the whole Empire, in part because of the proliferation of rival empires and because Britain was fast coming to depend upon the Empire for imports and strategic reserves.⁸¹

Fundamental to his conception of imperial defence was secured lines of communication. As Donald Schurman noted in his book on the birth of imperial defence, 'he argued that the first principle of war involved the disposition of forces in such a manner that the base of operations was secured and free communication assured.'⁸² In order to achieve this, Colomb called for the permanent stationing of large fleets of battleships in the Mediterranean and the North Sea to blockade the coasts of Britain's principle naval rivals, France and Russia.⁸³ To guard the sea lines of communication against warships which slipped out of the close blockade, which some were bound to do, it was necessary to station cruisers in bases at geographic chokepoints, such as Aden and Suez (both of which Colomb specifically identified as important naval stations).⁸⁴ These would be equipped with coal reserves to refuel the ships, and fortified to protect them from being seized by enemy cruisers. Stocks of coal stored in overseas bases would also make it easy for a fleet to travel from one ocean to the next, with guaranteed refuelling points along the way.⁸⁵

Colomb would go on to publish a series of works in the 1870s and 1880s pushing his imperial defence strategy, and he eventually became a leading advocate of the Imperial Federation movement.⁸⁶ His concept of a maritime-based imperial defence network built upon chains of naval bases was not immediately accepted by military thinkers within the government at the time, and even as he published *Protection of Our Commerce and Distribution of Our Naval Forces Considered*, the fortifications on the English south coast were still under construction. Nevertheless, his

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 28.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Lambert, 'The Royal Navy and the defence of empire, 1856-1918,' 116.

⁸⁶ Beeler, 'Colomb, Sir John Charles Ready (1838-1909)'.

arguments did begin to be discussed, even accepted, by a small but growing circle of figures within the Admiralty and in Parliament.

In the House of Commons, for example, as early as 1872 the Liberal MP for Cambridge, Robert Torrens, declared that 'England exists simply by reason of her command of the sea: she cannot retain that command unless she has numerous and secure coaling stations for the ships composing the Navy, and she could not have these coaling depots unless she retained her colonial possessions.'⁸⁷ Torrens had served as a legislator and then colonial treasurer of South Australia and had travelled across the various British colonies in Australasia before returning to Britain in 1862.⁸⁸ Torrens made it clear that he was by no means in favour of colonial funding. As he stated before the House,

I do not wish a shilling of the taxes of this country to be expended for the benefit of the colonies, but it would be a mistake to suppose that outlay on naval stations...came within that category...I think, then, the custody of those places should be resumed by the mother country, not in the interests of the colonists so much as in that of British shipowners and merchants.⁸⁹

Significantly, he pointed to the necessity of the naval station at Aden as a means to secure the line to India. 'How long would Great Britain retain her position in the Mediterranean if she lost Gibraltar or Malta? For what length of time would the Red Sea continue to be the channel between this country and India if Aden was lost to the possession of England?'⁹⁰

Amongst naval and military men, the same questions were beginning to surface. Sir William Vernon Harcourt, for example, delivered a speech to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on 15

⁸⁷ Robert Torrens, Speech to the House of Commons, 31 May 1872, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 211 (1872), 924.

⁸⁸ P. A. Howell, 'Torrens, Sir Robert Richard Chute (1812–1884)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27566>, accessed 15 July 2016].

⁸⁹ Torrens, 'Speech to the House of Commons,' 31 May 1872.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

May 1872 essentially endorsing a strategy similar to that propounded by Colomb.⁹¹ Harcourt, the Solicitor-General, had participated as an expert in international law in the diplomatic wrangling between Britain and in the United States during the *Trent* and the *Alabama* crises. Indeed, he was credited by Lord John Russell in 1868 for helping to preserve British neutrality during the US Civil War. Harcourt also grasped the strategic potential of new technology to transform the playing field between military and naval forces. As he explained to the assembled officers,

I venture to think that with the present appliances of swift vessels and telegraphs, you might know in a very short time what was happening in the North Sea at any moment. I do not see why you could not have the “Great Eastern” anchored off the harbour in constant communication with the War Office in London, with the present means of ocean telegraphy which we possess. At all events, you might have rapid communication; and if you have a superior fleet and an effective blockade, a flotilla of that character could not leave the harbour unless it had a fleet prepared to fight a general action.⁹²

As a Liberal, Harcourt rejected the idea that the Army should be the senior service in the defence of the British homeland. Instead, he suggested that the ability to project power through the navy and amphibious landings was a better guarantor of British national and imperial interests. Despite having no military experience, Harcourt demonstrated a firmer grasp of Britain’s changing strategic situation than some of the members of his audience.

After he concluded his remarks, General Sir John Mille Adye, for instance, rose to thank Harcourt for his speech. Adye had previously served in the Royal Artillery in Ireland, Malta, and London, and completed nine years of colonial service in India.⁹³ He had also seen action during the Crimean War and had served as adjutant-general of artillery during the Indian Mutiny.⁹⁴ In 1870 he

⁹¹ Peter Stansky, ‘Harcourt, Sir William George Granville Venables Vernon (1827–1904)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33693>, accessed 15 July 2016].

⁹² Sir William Vernon Harcourt, ‘Our Naval and Military Establishments Regarded with Reference to the Dangers of Invasion,’ *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 16 (1873), 585.

⁹³ E. M. Lloyd, ‘Adye, Sir John Miller (1819–1900)’, rev. James Lunt, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/176>, accessed 15 July 2016]

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

was appointed director of artillery and stores, where he successfully campaigned to retain the use of iron muzzle-loaders in the Army.⁹⁵ Adye was in many ways a classic mid-Victorian general, and he politely countered Harcourt's speech by raising the same objections that the Fortress Englanders had pointed to during the debates of the 1840s. 'If we are vigilant as we ought to be, the mouth of every harbour, of every creek, of every river should be barred to [the enemy] by means of land batteries, torpedoes, and floating batteries,' Adye declared to the assembly.⁹⁶

This brief exchange between Harcourt and Adye was symbolic of the changing nature of warfare and the transition from one mode of strategy to another. Ayde, an Army general with a distinguished career, represented the older, early Victorian approach to defence based on fortresses and coastal batteries aimed at deterring invasions from France. By contrast, Harcourt, a civilian noted for his intelligence and professionally rooted in the study of maritime law, clearly foresaw the rise of Colomb's strategy as the only viable means of defending the Empire with Britain's limited resources from a new generation of world powers. Like Colomb, Harcourt could appreciate the importance of the lines which criss-crossed the global oceanic common and how maintaining British dominance over these sea lanes was the key to her strategic power.

In 1874, the question of imperial defence and coaling stations was first taken up by the Admiralty when Sir Alexander Milne, the First Sea Lord, began to consider Britain's oversea coal supply.⁹⁷ Milne argued that to maintain the Royal Navy's global flexibility and control over the world's principle trade routes with short-ranged steam cruisers, it was necessary to establish coaling stations at frequent intervals along the world's shipping lines, including the Falklands, St. Helena, Cape York, King George Sound, Port Said, Malta, Gibraltar, Halifax and Gibraltar.⁹⁸ Donald Schurman suggested that Milne's proposal to build naval stations at these points demonstrated that the

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Harcourt, 'Our Naval and Military Establishments Regarded with Reference to the Dangers of Invasion,' 600.

⁹⁷ Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy*, 11.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Admiralty was, even at this early stage, becoming 'coal-conscious', and even 'worried' about British naval coal stockpiles.⁹⁹ Milne was undeniably concerned about the protection of British trade in wartime, and believed that attacks on British commerce was 'at least as serious as the threat of invasion',¹⁰⁰ which is why he supported the continued construction of armoured cruisers.¹⁰¹

Milne, who began serving as one of the naval lords in 1847, was acutely aware of the strategic importance of coal stocks as early as 1858, when he had drafted a memorandum to Queen Victoria following her state visit to Cherbourg during the unveiling of the new works at the port.¹⁰² Milne would later serve as commander of the North America & West Indies squadron, and the Mediterranean Fleet, and would eventually chair the royal commission called by Disraeli in 1879 to investigate Britain's imperial defences.¹⁰³

However, whilst the Admiralty recognised the vulnerability of its coaling stations to sudden enemy attacks, it did not have the influence in the parsimonious Disraeli government to muster support for a programme of defensive works. Instead, the task of drawing up landward defences for Britain's constellation of naval bases was left to the War Office, which was responsible for fortifications. Jervois, now Assistant Inspector-General of Fortifications, published his own proposal for the defence of overseas bases which was presented to the department in January 1875. His proposal called for large sums to be devoted to raising fortifications in Britain's principal overseas stations, to protect them from both landward attack and from surprise assaults from cruisers and light squadrons. Schurman called the Jervois Memorandum 'a landmark in the history of imperial defence',¹⁰⁴ and it operated on the principle that "the fleet is required for cruising, and cannot be

⁹⁹ Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Lambert, 'Milne, Sir Alexander, first baronet (1806–1896)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18781, accessed 15 July 2016].

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*, 34.

kept in harbour to guard its own supplies””.¹⁰⁵ Whilst Jervois himself was soon sent to distant Singapore, his ideas were ‘quietly adopted’ by his superior and by the department at large.¹⁰⁶ In December 1875 the Jervois Memorandum was presented to the government’s Defence Committee, where it was formally accepted as official government policy by the Commander-in-Chief the Duke of Cambridge.¹⁰⁷

Developments in the latter half of the 1870s appeared to confirm that Colomb’s strategy was the most effective way of maintaining Britain’s position in Europe and her dominance over ocean trade. In response to her humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, France sought to regain her national pride by expanding her navy and her empire to compensate for the provinces lost to Germany. In 1870, French naval expenditure was 74 per cent of Britain’s, a margin which steadily narrowed up until 1883 as the French tried to rebuild their naval capability.¹⁰⁸ It was also in the 1870s that French naval planners of the famed *Jeune École* began developing the torpedo boat as a possible counter to the British battleships of the Mediterranean Fleet.¹⁰⁹ French naval architects also succeeded in launching the *Infernet* and *Sané* classes of cruisers between 1871 and 1876 which could travel at 15 knots and which were cheaper to build than their British counterparts.¹¹⁰

Russia too increased its own naval spending, from a paltry 29 per cent of Britain’s naval budget to a more respectable 45 per cent by 1883.¹¹¹ And whilst the Italians could not hope to match the British in terms of number of ships, they did launch a series of battleships such as the *Italia* and the *Lepanto* which were technologically superior to any ship in the Royal Navy.¹¹² Like

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 193.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹¹⁰ Friedman, *British Cruisers of the Victorian Era*, 118.

¹¹¹ Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880*, 197.

¹¹² Ibid.

France, Italy also developed a series of *Cristoforo Colombo* class cruisers which could steam at 15 knots.¹¹³

On land, the European powers also began expanding the size of their armies through mass conscription, pushing the size of peacetime armies to dizzying new levels.¹¹⁴ Rolf Hobson in his study of imperialism at sea noted a growing tension in international relations during this period, and the militarisation of global politics.¹¹⁵ Increasingly large and sophisticated armies and navies needed more time to prepare and mobilise before being deployed, and this 'competitive augmentation of military force blurred the distinction between peace and war.'¹¹⁶

Some continued to believe that the answer to the militarisation of Europe lay in fixed fortifications in Britain and a large militia stationed for home defence. Major-General T.B. Collinson, brother of the famed explorer and accomplished surveying officer Richard Collison, in 1877 argued before RUSI that the government should rededicate itself to building harbour defences and anti-invasion fortifications. Asserting that all future wars were likely to be contained to Europe and fought over boundaries issues, he claimed that,

in respect of the most important war question of all to us, the security of these islands, the formation of huge national armies, and the increase of mercantile steamers sufficient to carry them over the sea with certainty, has put us back into a position of insecurity almost worse than that before 1860. And we have not as yet taken steps towards utilising to its full extent that powerful weapon for the defence of our coasts - the breech-loading rifle.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Friedman, *British Cruisers of the Victorian Era*, 118.

¹¹⁴ Philip Magnus, *Gladstone: A Biography* (London: John Murray, 1954), 257.

¹¹⁵ Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 43.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁷ Major-General T.B. Collinson, RE, 'On the Present Facilities for the Invasion of England, and for the Defence Thereof,' *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, 21 (1877), 5.

Despite Major-General Collinson's appeal, by the late 1870s and early 1880s, it was clear that the British government was moving away from a reliance on home fortresses to a strategy of imperial defence instead.

Froude, Seeley and the Strategic Culture of Empire

Part of this shift in public and official attitude must be attributed to two historians, James Anthony Froude and Sir John Seeley. Whilst discussions over coaling station defence and naval architecture remained confined to government departments in Whitehall and a select number of members of Parliament, Seeley and Froude revolutionised the way in which British society began to view the British Empire. Neither was an expert on military architecture or naval strategy, but each eloquently described the white settler colonies as integral parts of the wider British nation. Their works presented the British Empire in a whole new light, a world-state rather than a mixed-bag of eighteenth century colonies and Eastern dependencies.

Froude is perhaps best remembered as being one of the pioneers in establishing naval history as a recognised field within the discipline, elevating it from its previous status as an obscure hobby for retired naval officers and amateurs.¹¹⁸ According to one of his biographers, Froude was also an advocate of imperial federation 'long before it became a popular subject' and centred his philosophy on the creation of a united commonwealth of English-speaking peoples.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ John B. Hattendorf, 'The Study of War History at Oxford, 1862-1990,' in *The Limitations of Military Power: Essays Presented to Professor Norman Gibbs on his eightieth birthday*, ed. John Hattendorf and Malcolm Murfett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 7.

¹¹⁹ Waldo Hilary Dunn, *James Anthony Froude: A Biography*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 351 - 352.

Whilst living temporarily in County Kerry completing a work on eighteenth century English-Irish history, Froude wrote two articles on the relationship between Britain and the colonies.¹²⁰ As Duncan Bell argued, Froude's original interest in questions of theology and morality were the seedbed out of which grew his concept of empire. Observing the profound changes occurring within British society during the course of the nineteenth century, Froude blamed industrialisation and subsequent migration to massive cities as the leading cause of perceived decay of the nation's moral fibre.¹²¹ Overpopulation and urban life, Froude maintained, were undermining traditional British values rooted in the country yeomanry and were sapping the nation's strength.¹²² He even quoted Horace and his description of the fall of Rome, drawing parallels between the decay of the Roman Empire and Victorian Britain.¹²³ Imperial federation was, for Froude as much a moral project as a strategic one.¹²⁴

Froude's solution was to outsource Britain's burgeoning population to the colonies, thus at a stroke populating the world with British stock and unburdening the British Isles of a surplus populace. In his first article, Froude highlighted three powers in particular which he believed would in the future challenge Britain's global paramountcy – Germany, Russia, and the United States.¹²⁵ These states, with their huge natural resources, territorial expanse, and massive populations would eventually eclipse Britain if it were confined to the British Isles. Pushing against the prevailing mid-Victorian attitude which held that the colonies were merely burdens on the British taxpayer, Froude

¹²⁰ A. F. Pollard, 'Froude, James Anthony (1818–1894)', rev. William Thomas, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10202>, accessed 26 July 2016].

¹²¹ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 145.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 145.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Ciaran Brady, *James Anthony Froude: An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 260.

¹²⁵ James Anthony Froude, 'England and her Colonies,' in *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (London: Longmans Green, and Co., 1871), 151.

warned that Britain would be unable to compete on the world stage unless it could effectively utilise its colonial populations and resources.¹²⁶ Froude wrote:

These are not days for small states: the natural barriers are broken down which once divided kingdom from kingdom; and with the interests of nations so much intertwined as they are now becoming, every one feels the benefit of belonging to a first-rate Power.¹²⁷

He also argued that technological advances in shipping and communications could overcome the primary obstacle to a union of Britain and the colonies – namely, the vast distances which separated each territory in the Empire. ‘Steam and the telegraph have abolished distance,’¹²⁸ Froude announced, but he lamented that ‘we are not particularly sanguine that a large Imperial policy will receive consideration, at this time especially, when immediate peril seems to be no longer at our doors.’¹²⁹

As with Colomb, there is no evidence that Froude’s essays in 1870 were widely read by the general public. Froude was, however, closely connected with some of the leading aristocratic families in both the Liberal and Conservative parties. Through these connections and his friendships with the nation’s leading intellectuals, Froude was able to transmit his ideas on imperial power to at least five Cabinet ministers, including the Earl of Derby; Thomas Baring, the 1st Earl of Northbrook; Lord Hartington; Lord Salisbury; and Lord Carnarvon.

Froude originally contacted the Derby and Baring families whilst conducting his historical research. In 1862, Froude arrived at Hatfield House to access the Salisbury family archives where he quickly struck up a friendship with Lady Salisbury. This relationship eventually grew into what his contemporary biographer described as ‘one of his most valuable friendships.’¹³⁰ Lady Salisbury was closely connected with Disraeli’s government through her husband, and she in turn shared political

¹²⁶ Ibid., 172.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 175.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 173.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 315.

¹³⁰ Herbert W. Paul, *The Life of Froude* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1905), 117.

gossip from the Cabinet with Froude.¹³¹ A leading member of an elite circle, Lady Salisbury became deeply involved in Conservative politics, and she turned Hatfield House into a Tory base, regularly hosting parties and gatherings.¹³²

Following her husband's death in 1869, Lady Salisbury remained closely involved with parliamentary politics, marrying another political grandee, the Earl of Derby. Now the Countess of Derby, she continued to meet and correspond regularly with both Froude and leading Cabinet members, including Lord Carnarvon. A heartfelt series of letters sent between she and Carnarvon following Salisbury's death in 1869 gives a sense of how close their friendship was.¹³³ She remained the stepmother of the new Marquess of Salisbury, the future Secretary of State for India and Prime Minister, and she was also in contact with Lord Hartington, leader of the Liberal Party.¹³⁴ Hartington owned several of Froude's books in his private library at Chatsworth House.¹³⁵

With powerful patrons, Froude could channel his ideas to a powerful set of decisionmakers in Whitehall. The Countess, for example, introduced Froude to Lord Carnarvon, who became 'one of his greatest political friends...with whom he almost invariably agreed.'¹³⁶ Carnarvon attempted to persuade Froude to stand for Parliament, and although Froude refused, he did agree to Carnarvon's request to investigate the possibility of forming a South African confederation.¹³⁷ Significantly, entries in Carnarvon's diary make it clear that he confided with Froude on contemporary political issues, such as the proposal to integrate colonial and imperial naval forces, and he chose Froude to travel. On 30 April 1874, Carnarvon wrote, 'when I mentioned to [Froude] some of the difficulties as to a satisfactory joint action in naval matters by the colonies and ourselves, he said it was a curious

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Countess of Derby to Lord Carnarvon, letter, 1869, in Lady Burghclere, comp., *A Great Lady's Friendships: Letters to Mary, Marchioness of Salisbury Countess of Derby, 1862-1890* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1933), 218.

¹³⁴ Robert Lowe to the Countess of Derby, letter, 15 January 1869, in Burghclere, *A Great Lady's Friendships*, 215.

¹³⁵ _____, *Catalogue of the Library at Chatsworth House*, vol. 2 (London: Chiswick Press, 1879), 157

¹³⁶ Paul, *The Life of Froude*, 435.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 277.

reproduction of some of the difficulties in English and Irish history.’¹³⁸ A letter to Lady Derby from her close friend Sofie, Queen of the Netherlands, thanking Lady Derby for sending a copy of Froude’s latest book suggests that she promoted Froude’s ideas to her politically-powerful friends.¹³⁹

Through his research for a biography of his friend and mentor Carlyle, Froude also became connected with the elite Baring family. Froude became acquainted with Lady Louisa Ashburton who held many of Carlyle’s personal papers, and a friendship soon developed. Sixteen letters sent from Froude to Lady Louisa are stored in the Ashburton Papers in the National Library of Scotland. They include invitations to dine and even to spend summer holidays together. An undated letter from Froude to Lady Louisa shows that he became comfortable enough to share his opinion that Gladstone was ‘a traitor’,¹⁴⁰ as well as his reflections on the new Parliament.¹⁴¹

Froude’s friendship with Lady Louisa provided added another channel for his opinions on Empire to Britain’s political elite. Lady Louisa had married into the Baring family, and her husband was the cousin, once removed, of Thomas Baring, the 1st Earl of Northbrook, Viceroy of India and future First Lord of the Admiralty. Whilst the family connection may appear rather tenuous by modern standards, Lord Ashburton had left a portion to his fortune to Lord Northbrook, who took it upon himself to advise his cousin’s widow on her financial arrangements following Ashburton’s death.¹⁴² In addition to discussing very personal financial matters, Northbrook also kept Lady Louisa informed of his travels as Viceroy in India, and his letters contained discussions on the state of Indian politics.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Peter Gordon, ed., *The Political Diaries of the Fourth Earl of Carnarvon, 1857-1890*, vol. 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219.

¹³⁹ Queen Sofie to Lady Salisbury, letter, 21 July 1867, in Burghclere, *A Geat Lady's Friendships*, 134.

¹⁴⁰ National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/77, James Anthony Froude to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 26 January nd.

¹⁴¹ National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/77, James Anthony Froude to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 21 May nd.

¹⁴² National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/60, James Anthony Froude to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 12 April nd.

¹⁴³ National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/60, James Anthony Froude to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 8 September 1872.

Although none of the letters sent by Northbrook to Lady Louisa contain any explicit references to Froude himself, there are hints that his opinions came to be transmitted to Northbrook. The letters contain discussions on politics, and a mutual interest in naval affairs. On one occasion, Northbrook had to decline Lady Louisa's invitation to hear an address by an admiral in London.¹⁴⁴ In 1884, when Lady Louisa's daughter became engaged, she received a letter of congratulations from Northbrook's private secretary, Sir Lewis Beaumont, who wrote 'I have just heard from Lady Emma [Louisa's second daughter] of Miss Baring's engagement and I lose no time in writing to congratulate you on the happy event.'¹⁴⁵ Several months later Beaumont accompanied Northbrook on a fact-finding mission to Egypt, and his note suggests that Lady Louisa and her branch of the Baring family remained relatively close to Northbrook. Their willingness to write about politics hints that Froude's ideas about the Empire may have been filtered to Northbrook through his Scottish relatives.

Whilst Froude's work remained confined to a small set of influential political elites, a Cambridge historian succeeded in garnering public attention to the cause of imperial defence. John Robert Seeley published his magisterial work *The Expansion of England* in 1883, and, unlike Froude's initial essays, it was rapturously received by the British public almost instantly. Seeley's book is widely regarded as one of the most influential works on the history of the British Empire. He achieved a far wider impact with the general public because his book went beyond dry technical discussions and placed imperial defence within the much grander and sweeping framework of imperial federation. *The Expansion of England* did not present imperial defence as an academic discussion to be held by small groups of military experts, but instead claimed that Britain's very destiny as a Great Power depended upon the integration of the Empire into a single polity. Seeley wrote vividly about how the formation of huge states encompassing whole continents, such as the

¹⁴⁴ National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/60, Lord Northbrook to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 18 May nd.

¹⁴⁵ National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Acc.11388/61, Admiral Sir Lewis Beaumont to Lady Louisa Ashburton, letter, 29 March 1884.

United States, would eventually doom Britain to second-class status, unless it could bring together its own empire to challenge these new contenders. Unlike Colomb, who was a relatively obscure figure outside of a small set of strategists, Seeley became a household name. *The Expansion of England* influenced a generation of policymakers, including Joseph Chamberlain, in addition to cementing the idea that imperial defence was the future of British grand strategy.

Seeley published the book in 1883, slightly later than the debates discussed above, but it presented the essence of Colomb's argument and put it into terms accessible to a general audience. He began by identifying colonial expansion as the most important factor in Britain's national power. England's empire, he contended, was also unique from others because it was not so much an imperial dominion, but an extension of the English state itself.¹⁴⁶ Because 'the English Empire in the main and broadly may be said to be English throughout,'¹⁴⁷ Seeley argued, 'it creates not properly an Empire, but only a very large state.'¹⁴⁸ Hence, Seeley believed, the white settler colonies of the British Empire should not be considered colonies as such, but instead as provinces of a 'Greater Britain.'¹⁴⁹

Seeley defended the notion of a Greater Britain by pointing to a single state 'united by blood and religion, and though circumstances may be imagined in which these ties might snap, yet they are strong ties, and will only give way before some violent dissolving force.'¹⁵⁰ More importantly, Seeley suggested that England was now dependent on the Empire to retain its status as a Great Power. It was the empire which had originally brought England out of its 'ancient insular insignificance,' but now England was faced with two alternative futures.¹⁵¹ If its four groups of white settler colonies in Canada, the West Indies, South Africa, and Australasia federated into independent states, Britain

¹⁴⁶ J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1883), 8.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

would sink to 'the same level as the states nearest to us on the Continent, populous, but less so than Germany and scarcely equal to France.'¹⁵²

Seeley foresaw the rise of the United States and Russia as the world's newest global powers. These two states were continental in the sense they commanded the populations and resources of entire continents, something which could never be rivalled by any one of the constellation of European states.¹⁵³ This put the United States and Russia 'on an altogether higher scale of magnitude,' and if limited to the British Isles, England would naturally sink to the status of a second-rate power.¹⁵⁴

If Britain could integrate her empire into Greater Britain, however, the Empire could transform itself into a continental power of its own; conjoined, not separated, by the world's oceans. As Seeley wrote,

[Russia and the United States] are the two States which I have cited as examples of the modern tendency towards enormous political aggregations, as would have been impossible but for the modern inventions which diminish the difficulties caused by time and space. Both are continuous land-powers. Between them, equally vast but not continuous, with the ocean following through it in every direction, like a world-Venice, with the sea for streets, Greater Britain.¹⁵⁵

Steam and electricity, along with the relatively-new concept of a federation, therefore appeared to Seeley to offer the promise of preserving British power in the face of a new set of challengers.¹⁵⁶ Imperial consolidation was the key, and Seeley pointed to the historical parables of smaller states which had been swallowed up by their neighbours. As with Athens and Florence, for example, 'both

¹⁵² Ibid., 16.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 288.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 301.

states sank at once as soon as large country-states of consolidated strength grew up in their neighbourhood.¹⁵⁷

Seeley's book was a sensation, and it changed the impetus for imperial defence from defending Britain's colonial possessions into a much more sweeping responsibility to maintain Britain's place as a world power. Influential statesmen such as Joseph Chamberlain, the future Colonial Secretary, and Sir Charles Dilke, a member of Gladstone's cabinet during the 1880s, credited Seeley as the inspiration for their support of imperial federation. During his famous 1897 speech to the Royal Colonial Institute, for example, Chamberlain specifically cited Seeley's work as one of the main drivers of imperial unionism, and went on to state that,

As regards the self-governing colonies we no longer talk of them as dependencies. The sense of possession has given place to the sentiment of kinship. We think and speak of them as part of ourselves, as part of the British Empire, united to us, although they may be dispersed throughout the world, by ties of kinship, of religion, of history, and of language, and joined to us by the seas that formerly seemed to divide us.¹⁵⁸

Seeley galvanised public support for a new concept of Empire as a Greater Britain. *The Expansion of England* sold 80,000 copies in its first two years,¹⁵⁹ and Seeley emerged as one of the leading members of the Imperial Federation League in 1884, along with Colomb.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Colomb had already written to Seeley in 1883 to express his 'intense interest' in *The Expansion of England*.¹⁶¹ He congratulated Seeley on his decision to frame the Empire as a Greater Britain, and wrote that 'It is to my mind but too painfully apparent that even experts take too limited a view of the British defence

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Boyd, ed., *Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 1-6.

¹⁵⁹ Deborah Wormwell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 154.

¹⁶⁰ Howard D'Egville, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1913), 99.

¹⁶¹ Senate House Library, Papers of John Seeley, MS903/1B/17, John Colomb to Sir John Seeley, letter, 6 November 1883.

question because they have been...matured in that atmosphere of traditional engendering the belief that England is still “the island of England” of bye-gone years.’¹⁶²

In addition, although Seeley’s influence was focused more at the level of public opinion, an examination of his personal papers reveals that he, like Froude, was also in contact with a number of key politicians, albeit on a smaller scale. In 1878, he received a personal invitation to breakfast with Gladstone,¹⁶³ and he corresponded with the similarly-minded imperialist Sir Charles Dilke, one of the members of Gladstone’s second Cabinet during the 1880s.¹⁶⁴ Following the split in the Liberal Party over the Irish Home Rule question, Seeley became a leading figure in organising a Liberal Unionist branch in Cambridge. For this, he received the thanks of Lord Hartington,¹⁶⁵ a keen imperialist whose role in deploying troops to the Eastern Sudan will be examined at length in Chapter IV, and he helped to arrange an invitation for the lawyer-turned-navalist Thomas Brassey to deliver an address at the university.¹⁶⁶

Seeley is now generally acknowledged as having played a pivotal role in the change of attitude in Victorian society towards Britain’s empire.¹⁶⁷ He and Froude helped to introduce a new way of looking at the Empire, and their influence was apparently felt at both the level of public opinion as well as in sets of elite decisionmakers.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Senate House Library, Papers of John Seeley, MS903/1, Helen Gladstone to Sir John Seeley, letter, 29 June 1878.

¹⁶⁴ Senate House Library, Papers of John Seeley, MS903/1, Sir Charles Dilke to Sir John Seeley, letter, n.d.

¹⁶⁵ Senate House Library, Papers of John Seeley, MS903/1B/17, Lord Hartington to Sir John Seeley, letter, 27 October 1887.

¹⁶⁶ Senate House Library, Papers of John Seeley, MS903/1B/17, Lord Brassey to Sir John Seeley, letter, 11 February 1888.

¹⁶⁷ D’Egville, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union*, 99.

Evidence which supports the idea that thinkers such as Colomb, Froude, and Seeley shifted the British public's view of the relationship between Britain and the colonies comes from a simple search of Google's Ngram Viewer. By analysing Google Book's entire collection of English-language texts, Ngram reveals an intriguing trend in the terminology which occurred over the course of the nineteenth century:

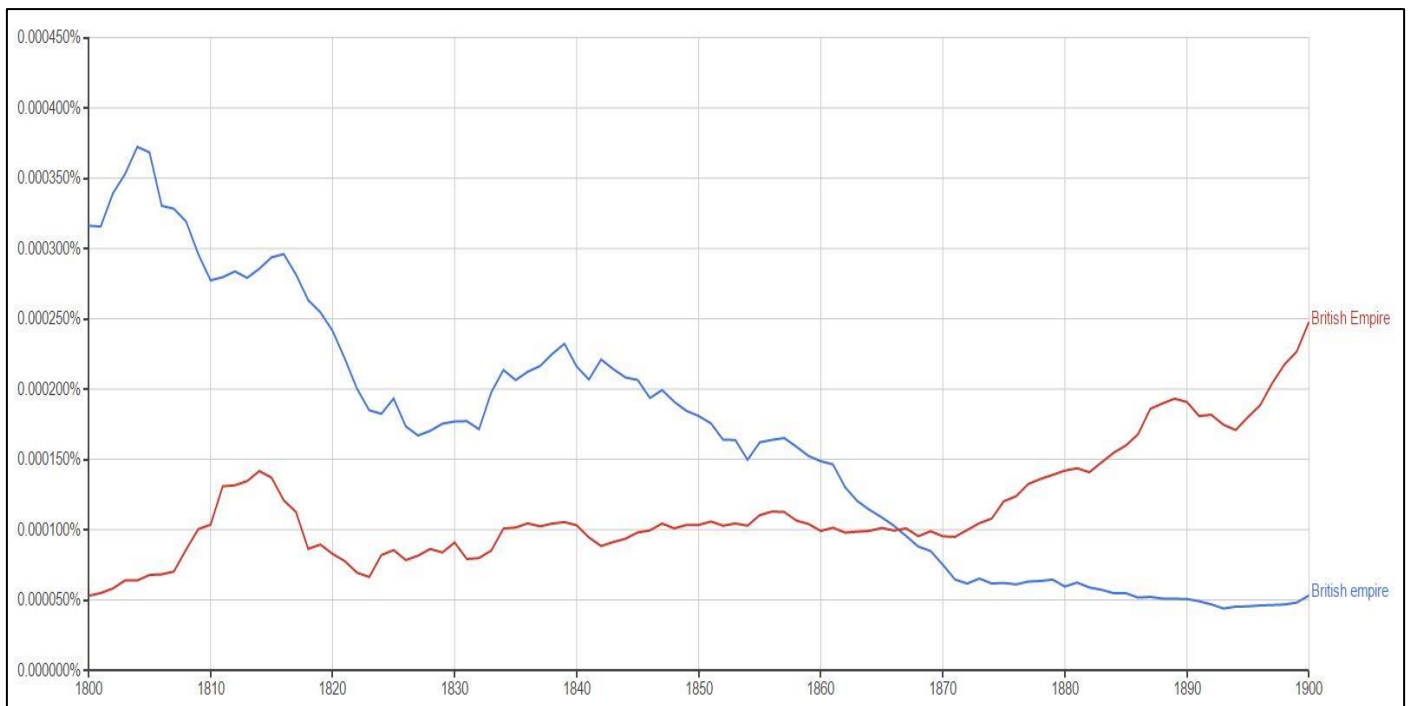


Figure 3: Shifts in Imperial Terminology

Google Ngram, Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden*. Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books. Science (Published online ahead of print: 12/16/2010).

The capitalisation of 'British Empire' superseded the older spelling of 'British empire' in the late 1860s, and quickly began to replace the term in the 1870s. By contrast, the use of 'empire' without the capital E began to enter a period of terminal decline by 1860, roughly bottoming out in 1893. The use of 'Empire' as a proper noun suggests a wider acceptance of the British Empire as a political entity in and of itself, rather than simply a convenient collective noun for the United Kingdom's various colonial possessions. This grammatical change may be minor, but it does highlight the growing perception of the British Empire as a single political unit on the world map. Previous writers

such as Froude had been reluctant to embrace the idea of Britain as an empire, because of its implications for traditional Whiggish ideas about English liberty and constitutional monarchy. However, this trend in English-language publications appears to show that writers were becoming more and more comfortable discussing the idea of Britain and her colonies as a single Empire in its own right in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

Moreover, it was in 1871 that the 'invasion' genre of fiction was first pioneered. George Tomkyns Chesney published his novella *The Battle of Dorking* in 1871, painting a grim picture of Britain invaded by a neighbouring rival and annexed as part of a European empire. In the story, an unnamed, militaristic, German-speaking Continental power declares war against the United Kingdom and prepares to invade. The Channel Fleet is mobilised and sent into the North Sea to intercept the invasion force in the water, only to be wiped out by a mysterious superweapon referred only to as the enemy's 'fatal engines'.¹⁶⁸ Powerless to stop them, the nation watches enemy troops storm ashore in Sussex and march north towards London. After a short, sharp battle at the Dorking gap, the British Army and its enthusiastic volunteers are swept aside and the victorious enemy descends on London and captures the arsenal at Woolwich.

The novella ends with Britain as an oppressed and overtaxed province of a European empire, a victim of its own short-sightedness and indolence. Through the voice of his protagonist, Chesney railed against the lack of fortifications and supplies, and chronic underinvestment in the armed forces. The message of his book was clear: that larger states such as Germany now posed as existential threat to Britain. If Britain could not keep up in terms of manpower and resources, it would sink to second-tier status and would likely be swallowed up by a stronger neighbour. Indeed, *The Battle of Dorking* launched an entire genre of stories devoted to depictions of invasions of the British Isles, including, most famously, Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* published in 1903. Prominent imperial defence advocates sometimes even wrote these stories themselves; John

¹⁶⁸ George Tomkyns Chesney, *The Battle of Dorking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

Colomb's brother and fellow imperial defence strategist, Admiral Philip Colomb, for example, was one of the authors of best-selling *The Great War of 189-*.

Public anxiety about eclipse and invasion was not confined to Britain, and unease about the state of international relations in the nineteenth century was widespread across Europe. The unification of the German and Italian principalities into big European states seemed to signal that the future belonged to large empires and that smaller polities would eventually be subsumed by one power or another. In 1880, whilst Britain remained the leading industrial power, the gap between its manufacturing output and those of its closest economic competitors, Germany and the United States, was closing.¹⁶⁹ To maintain her lead, Britain was becoming ever-more reliant on the invisible exports of financial services, which in turn depended on the free movement of trade and capital.¹⁷⁰ The reliance on the City of London to shore up Britain's economic dominance and the threat of an economic war amongst the growing powers of Europe increasingly began raising concerns amongst London policymakers in the late 1870s and early 1880s.¹⁷¹

Sea Lines

In Britain, the changing global strategic landscape and the new vision of Empire led to focus on the sea lines which bound the Empire together, including the newest route through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The steamship enabled reliable transit across through the sea, and had made proposals to cut a canal across the Isthmus of Suez a commercially-viable enterprise. When the canal did open in 1869, it created a new line of communication with the Indian Ocean through the Mediterranean, and British strategists strove to secure Britain's control over this new trade and transport route. Naval power and maritime security were at the heart of this initiative, and as Brodie

¹⁶⁹ For further detail, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), 190-248.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

noted in his own study of the period, 'It is not an historical accident that the powerful resurgence of imperialism in the latter part of the nineteenth century coincided with the great development of the steamship.'¹⁷² The canal's opening also took place within the wider context of a rapidly evolving strategic landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean, which would form part of the backdrop to the British position in the Red Sea in the 1870s and 1880s.

The most immediate problem which British planners faced was the Eastern Crisis with Russia between 1877 and 1878, which threatened to pull Britain once again into another hegemonic war. The outbreak of the war between Russia and the tottering Ottoman Empire in 1877 set off alarm bells in London because it appeared that Britain's primary bulwark against Russian naval activity in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East was finally collapsing. In an attempt to shore up the Ottomans as the Russian army marched south through the Danubian principalities towards Constantinople, Disraeli famously deployed the Mediterranean Fleet and units from the Indian Army to the Mediterranean in 1877 to head off their advance. Although the subsequent Russian victory over the Ottomans in 1878 was tempered somewhat by the Congress of Berlin, the war was nevertheless a significant triumph for Russia. Even in colonies as far away as New South Wales, colonial governments fretted over the possibility of Russian cruisers attacking undefended ports and appealed to Britain for protection.¹⁷³

It is therefore not surprising that for the first time in the late 1870s the Admiralty began to craft a grand imperial defence plan.¹⁷⁴ In 1878, the first official committee was established to examine the security of the Empire's sea lines of communication and the coal stocks stored in key naval stations. The Colonial Defence Committee included Lord Carnarvon, as well as his successor at the Colonial Office, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, who issued the following circular to the governors of the Cape, Mauritius, Ceylon, Singapore, and Hong Kong:

¹⁷² Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 107.

¹⁷³ Schurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*, 49.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

I may remind you that in such an event, the danger against which it would be more immediately necessary to provide, would be an unexpected attack by a small squadron, or even a single unarmoured cruiser, with the object of destroying public or private property, or levying contributions on the Colony, rather than any serious attempt at the conquest or permanent occupation of any portion of the country.¹⁷⁵

The committee would issue four reports over the course 1878 regarding the defences of important coaling stations abroad. The first examined the defences of the stations listed above, specifically because they formed an important communications route across the Indian Ocean.¹⁷⁶ The committee's second report considered the defences of the Australian colonies, Tasmania, and New Zealand,¹⁷⁷ and the fourth investigated the fortifications at Heligoland, St. Helena, Sierra Leone, Barbados, Jamaica, and Newfoundland.¹⁷⁸

Most important was the committee's fourth report which discussed not only the fixed defences around the colonies, but also their potential use as coaling stations and dry docks.¹⁷⁹ The committee framed its study of these colonies in terms of their suitability for repairing and refuelling ships as well and more immediate threats from Russia which had arisen from the Eastern Crisis. The defences which the committee recommended for each colonial port were designed to thwart attacks from lone cruisers or light flotillas which might escape from the Baltic or Black seas and interrupt British trade or communications. As the committee stated in one of its reports,

Experience has shown during the American Civil War that it is a matter of extreme difficulty, if not of impossibility, to prevent much mischief being done in this way by a single fast cruiser, notwithstanding great efforts to capture her. It rests with Her Majesty's Government

¹⁷⁵ Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Colonial Governors, letter, 28 March 1878, in National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/1, Cabinet Office Records, Colonial Defence Committee, First Report, 1878.

¹⁷⁶ National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/1, Cabinet Office Records, Colonial Defence Committee, First Report, 1878.

¹⁷⁷ National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/1, Cabinet Office Records, Colonial Defence Committee, Second Report, 1878.

¹⁷⁸ National Archives, Kew, CO 537/163, Colonial Office Records, Colonial Defence Committee, Third Report, 1878.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

to decide when the time shall have arrived for the naval forces to be increased to the extent required to meet this danger, which increase will involve a very large money expenditure.¹⁸⁰

Because the committee only sat for a brief period of time, it drew many of its recommendations from those already made by Jervois in his previous reports. However, despite recognising the need for a more organised approach to imperial defence, following its reports the committee was dissolved and its recommendations largely ignored. Nevertheless, it was significant because its reports did pave the way for the creation of a more wide-ranging royal commission in 1879.

The Carnarvon Commission of 1879

Following the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, which appeared to settle the Eastern Crisis, in 1879 Disraeli agreed to organise a Royal Commission to study systematically the state of Britain's imperial defences, including the existing lines of communication and coal supplies. The committee was this time put under the control of Lord Carnarvon, a man seemingly converted to the vision of Greater Britain, and hence became unofficially known as the Carnarvon Commission. The Carnarvon Commission was much more ambitious in scope than its predecessor, which had functioned essentially a subcommittee of the Cabinet. The Royal Commission set up in 1879 signalled that the government was prepared to take a long-term view of the future of British imperial security. It also further indicates a certain level of commitment to the imperial defence strategy advocated by the likes of Colomb, Froude, and Seeley.

The Carnarvon Commission would ultimately sit for three years before issuing its recommendations in three reports in 1882. This lengthy period allowed the commission to interview a large number of experts and colonial representatives, and to examine a great deal of evidence before issuing its official opinion. Reflecting its mandate, the commission paid particularly close

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

attention not only to the fortification of colonial ports and coal depots, but also to the security of the communication lines between them, including both shipping routes and undersea telegraph wires. The allocation of resources to particular ports or routes was determined by their strategic value to the Empire, as measured in terms of the volume of trade and relevance for warships.

It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss the Commission's findings in detail beyond those pertinent to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Previous work has shown that the Commission's significance for the waterway lay largely in the fact that it represented an official endorsement of the policy of imperial defence. This perspective in turn focused attention towards the Red Sea and the state of British control over the waterway, including imperial communications between Suez and Aden.

The commission sat between 1879 and 1882, when it issued its final reports and recommendations. In its recommendations published in 1882, the commission began by noting that Britain was now dependent on maritime trade for both her prosperity as well as her ability to feed herself, on the web of undersea telegraph wires for inter-imperial communications, and in wartime, on global stocks of coal for warships.¹⁸¹ Each of these, the commission reported, were vulnerable to attack. There was, for example, 'a great risk, on the outbreak of war, of important and well-known lines of submarine telegraph being cut'. Moreover, the commission found that most coaling stocks lay essentially undefended, and given the proliferation of steamships, Britain's ability to rule the high seas was potentially in jeopardy. The commission wrote, 'we believe that the strategy by which a naval force is to obtain the command of a given sea will resolve itself very much into a question of coal supply, and how best to deprive the enemy of his supplies, while securing ample supplies for our own ships.'¹⁸² Given France and Russia's lack of overseas naval bases, this was an accurate assessment.

¹⁸¹ National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/3, Cabinet Office Records, Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad, Second Report, 1882.

¹⁸² Ibid.

As the strategists in the 1870s had argued, the commission recommended that the government should focus on the links of coaling stations which connected Britain with her distant colonial possessions: 'No addition to the number or fighting power of your Majesty's ships will make up for the want of coaling-stations, which to be of use must be able to defend themselves...we desire to impress upon your Majesty's Government the paramount importance to the British Empire of secure coaling-stations.'¹⁸³ The commission warned that 'without secure and well placed coaling-stations your Majesty's ships, however numerous and powerful, will be unable to protect trade, or perhaps even to reach distant parts of the Empire.'¹⁸⁴ Hence, the commission recommended specific funds for each coaling station which it identified as crucial to imperial security to preserve these all-important links between Britain and the Empire, including £235,000 for Aden along with an increase in its garrison to 2,000 men.¹⁸⁵ The commission specifically noted in its recommendation for Aden that 'the loss of so commanding a position would be disastrous.'¹⁸⁶

However, despite an exhaustive investigation into the state of Britain's imperial defences and the publication of an extensive list of recommendations, the Carnarvon Commission's findings were initially ignored by the government. In the general election of 1880, Gladstone and the Liberal Party had been returned to power. Gladstone's famous 1878-1880 Midlothian Campaign had heavily featured speeches denouncing militarism and imperialism, and Gladstone was propelled back into the premiership partly on the basis of his anti-imperial plank. The new Prime Minister was therefore uninterested in dedicating the huge sums of money recommended by the commission to the fortification of Britain's coaling stations or to any possible expansion of the British Empire. The commission's reports were quietly shelved: Gladstone used the excuse of national secrecy to smother its findings.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ National Archives, Kew, CO 885/8, Colonial Office Records, Summary of the Reports of the Royal Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad, February 1883.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, the commission confirmed imperial defence as a fixture of Britain's grand strategy, and thanks to its reports, in 1885 the Colonial Defence Committee was revived as a semi-permanent body within the Colonial Office. In addition, by 1884 Sir Thomas Brassey, then Secretary of the Admiralty, could announce before Parliament that 'the defence of coaling stations abroad and the mercantile harbours at home is...one of the most urgent necessities of the moment, and a necessity intimately connected with the proposals for strengthening the Navy.'¹⁸⁷ He also proclaimed that 'the Navy may be regarded as a link which helps to bind together the Mother Country and her Colonies.'¹⁸⁸ Therefore, whilst the Carnarvon Commission's recommendations were not immediately acted upon by the Liberal ministry in 1882, it established the principle that imperial defence was Britain's strategy. Furthermore, its specific recommendations would form the basis of several important initiatives undertaken by military authorities independently in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the 1880s.

Conclusion

The development of the imperial defence strategy was a response to changes in naval technology and the shifting balance of power in the international system. Fears that the Royal Navy would lose its ability to deter an invasion from France led to the construction of Palmerston's forts for the protection of important dockyards such as Portsmouth. However, the course of the US Civil War and the rise of new industrial powers clearly illustrated that the United Kingdom on its own risked being relegated to the status of a second-class power. Without the resources and population of an entire continent, such as Russia or the United States, the British Isles could not compete in the long-run with this set of new rivals.

¹⁸⁷ Sir Thomas Brassey, Speech to the House of Commons, 2 December 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 294 (1884), 461.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The answer appeared to lie in the integration of Britain and the colonies of settlement into a Greater Britain, a sea-borne imperial state based on a network of coaling stations and telegraph wires. Prophets of a new imperialism, such as Froude and Seeley, preached this new body-politic as the panacea to guarantee Britain's place as a paramount power, while naval strategists such as Colomb outlined the means to create it. Whilst these men are perhaps best remembered for the public impact of their works, they were also closely connected with a new generation of politicians who would shape the future of the British Empire. Central to their vision was the protection of secure sea lines of communication, the nervous system of the imperial body. 'Quietly and persistently the great sea Powers proceeded, with some mutual irritation and hostility, to acquire position after position along the seas into which their people and their ships [poured],' as one historian of the period noted.¹⁸⁹

The increasing awareness that Britain would be dependent on the Empire to secure its position, and that the Empire could only be protected by the deterrence of the Royal Navy, was manifested in the creation of the Colonial Defence Committee and the Carnarvon Commission. Though their policy recommendations were initially ignored by the Liberal government, they framed the question of imperial defence around the protection of coaling stations and shipping lines. As distasteful as he found militarism and imperialism, Gladstone's hand would eventually be forced by events in Egypt in beginning in 1882 and by younger members of his Cabinet who had been converted to the idea of Greater Britain. The adoption of the imperial defence strategy set the stage for the violent expansion of British control over the shores of northeastern Africa as the Egyptian colonial empire began to collapse in the mid-1880s.

¹⁸⁹ Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age*, 108.

Chapter III

Introduction

Even as the concept of imperial defence took hold in Britain as a viable means of global strategy, in the Red Sea itself, British sea-borne traffic and communications had already increased the waterway's importance to imperial trade and transport. P&O steamships had begun ploughing through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait on the Suez-Bombay route regularly as early as 1837. By the 1870s, a handful of Her Majesty's ships from the East Indies Squadron commenced cruises through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, undertaking the typical duties of warships in peacetime – law enforcement and trade protection. A small number of British-built and operated lighthouses helped to guide ships through the sea and symbolised the benefits of British control over the waters.

The opening of Ferdinand de Lesseps canal across the Isthmus of Suez in November 1869 only brought into sharper relief the necessity of upholding British paramountcy along the Red Sea. Once again, the presence of largely unexplored and unclaimed territory around the Red Sea stoked fears in London that other European powers would outmanoeuvre the British by staking territorial claims along the new route to the East. Recognising the danger but unwilling to pay the large financial cost of capturing and occupying the barren territory of northeastern Africa and southern Arabia, the British initially resorted to diplomatic means to prevent France and Italy from establishing footholds in the area. Treaties of protection were signed with the local rulers of strategic islands, and Whitehall agreed to participate in the legal fiction propounded by the ambitious Khedive Ismail of Egypt that he owned the entire coastline from Suez to Cape Guardafui.

This chapter will chart Britain's increasing involvement in and imperial commitment to the Red Sea region from the middle of the century up until the early 1880s. Even as statesmen and military commanders in London embraced the concept of imperial defence, local men on the spot

were taking measures to maintain British paramountcy along the Suez route. The chapter will examine the growth of British shipping in the Red Sea during the period, including the influence of shipping companies on persuading the government to construct lighthouses and to commission surveys of the Red Sea – both examples of the type of ‘soft-power’ exercises which marked British maritime dominance. It will also argue that the seizure of two strategically important islands, Perim and Socotra, were further examples of the principle of pre-emptive imperialism which would later lead the British to annex much larger territories such as Sudan and Somaliland.

Furthermore, the following chapter will examine the Royal Navy’s activity in the sea and discuss its campaign against the local slave trade between Africa and Arabia. Although some historians have argued that the Victorian crusade against the slave trade acted as a precursor to imperial expansion, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate that the Royal Navy’s anti-slaving operations were a reflection, not a cause, of British naval paramountcy. It was only after other European powers began deploying warships to the region that the British abandoned the hunt for slave ships and instead started to focus on seizing territory.

Finally, it will explore the construction of Egypt’s paper-empire along the Red Sea littoral. In the 1870s, these claims became central to Britain’s strategy of shutting out the French and Italians from the area. Discussions in Whitehall clearly show that, despite British claims that this was simply a necessary measure against the slave trade, the recognition of a fictional Egyptian buffer state was done expressly to prevent rival European governments from establishing naval stations along the coast. The British had already used this tactic successfully in Socotra and Yemen, and were simply adopting it on a much larger scale.

One of the key themes of this period is the influence of the India Office in promoting active measures in the Red Sea region. This is perhaps not surprising, given the fact that Aden had remained part of the Bombay presidency and British officials in India were more acutely aware of the potentially vulnerable transportation and communication links back home. For this reason, the

following chapter draws heavily on the India Office records held in the British Library and pays particularly close attention to the opinions expressed by the Indian Secretary and the Viceroy as the key decisionmakers.

Shipping & Lights

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the Admiralty's attention drifted away from the Red Sea. Following the conflict, interest in the waterway came primarily from distant colonial populations in the East hoping to establish regular contact with 'home'. The first calls for the creation of a steam route between Britain and India via Suez came from Sir John Malcolm, a soldier of the East India Company's Madras Army who rose to become Governor of Bombay in 1827.¹ In 1829, he despatched Thomas Elwon and Robert Moresby in the paddlesteamers *Benares* and *Palinurus* to survey the Red Sea, which was still largely uncharted. Whilst in India and following his eventual return to Britain, Malcom remained a champion for a steam line to India, although his vision for regular steam service remained unfulfilled during his tenure in office.

In addition to Malcolm, pressure for steam communication through the Red Sea also came from the European colonial population of India. Isolated from home by the months-long voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, in 1835 the white residents of Calcutta petitioned the Honourable East India Company to pay for the creation of a new route back to Europe through the Red Sea.² Whilst it was extremely difficult for sailing ships to pass through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the new

¹ Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Malcolm, Sir John (1769–1833)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17864>, accessed 12 Dec 2016].

² British Library, India Office Records, Board's Collections: 1830s, IOR/F/4/1730, Memorial of the inhabitants of Calcutta to the Court of Directors praying for the establishment of a regular steamship communication between England and India by way of the Red Sea, 5 March 1835.

steamships which were being developed could travel through the Strait to Suez despite contrary wind patterns.³

Fortunately for the European population, by 1834 the feeling in Parliament had already begun to lean towards the principle of a steam route to India. After securing support from the government, the East India Company agreed to establish a regular postal service by steamer between Bombay and Suez aboard the *Hugh Lindsay*, a small purpose-built vessel.⁴ However, there existed some debate whether this route should go through the Red Sea or instead via the Euphrates River and the Persian Gulf. Amidst public calls for the creation of passenger service to India via the Middle East, the famed scientist and contemporary savant Professor Dionysus Lardner of University College London wrote to the Prime Minister Lord Melbourne urging him to establish a route through the Red Sea rather than the Euphrates. Lardner pointed out that the sea had already been surveyed by Elwon and Moresby, and that the new generation of steamships were ideally equipped to face the winds and currents which effectively barred sailing ships from entering the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.⁵ Lardner also noted that improving communication and transport links with India via the Red Sea would likely result in greater British control over the entire Indian subcontinent.⁶

It is unclear whether Lardner's letter to the Prime Minister proved to have decisive influence, but the government and the shipping companies ultimately did choose to adopt the Red Sea route to India. By 1837 a regular packet service steamed between Bombay and Suez.⁷ Beginning in 1840, the recently-formed Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) began operating a steam service from Britain to Alexandria, which was later expanded with a service from

³ Ibid.

⁴ British Library, India Office Records, Board's Collections: 1830s, IOR/F/4/1730, Court of Directors Notice on Postage, 18 February 1835.

⁵ Dionysius Lardner, *Steam Communication with India by the Red Sea; Advocated in a Letter to the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Melbourne* (London: Allen & Co., 1837), 23-24.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Freda Harcourt, 'The High Road to India: The P&O Company and the Suez Canal, 1840-1874,' *International Journal of Maritime History* 22 (2010), 22.

Suez to India to create the famed Overland Route.⁸ Although the Overland Route required passengers to travel across the Egyptian desert from Cairo to Suez, it nevertheless considerably shortened the long voyage to India.

The introduction of the steamship also introduced the problem of supply as the inefficient paddle steamers of the time could not be expected to make lengthy journeys without frequently refilling their coal bunkers. Furthermore, the creation of a shipping lane through the Red Sea also drew attention to the various islands, shoals, and rocks which lay along the route from Bombay to Suez. Although Elwon and Moresby had succeeded in completing a general survey of the Red Sea, the rocks and islands which litter the sea still posed a serious navigational hazard, particularly at night as no lighthouses or warning beacons had yet been constructed. Even as late as 1874, in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, the Admiralty's Superintendent of Charts, T.A. Hull admitted that 'I regret being unable to mark the shores of this sea with the dark line [indicating that it had been fully surveyed].'⁹ Hull did add that he had 'little doubt the trade through the Suez Canal will enforce this work.'¹⁰

Shipping companies were therefore eager to explore opportunities for constructing coaling stations and lighthouses to ensure adequate protection for their ships plying the Suez route. The East India Company's own Bengal government suggested to the Court of Directors that a coaling depot could be established on Socotra. 'We propose to depute [Captain Daniel Ross] to obtain information respecting the Island of Socotra and the most eligible Situation for a Depot there in aid of Steam Communication between India and England.'¹¹ The governor also suggested that Ross be empowered to 'negotiate with the Chief of the Island for his good Offices in behalf of the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ T.A. Hull, 'The Unsurveyed World, 1874', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 19 (1 February 1875), 58.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ British Library, India Office Records, Board's Collections vol. 1504, IOR/F/4/1504, Proposal to Send Captain Daniel Ross IN to the island of Socotra, 21 December 1833.

Establishment.¹² The Court agreed, and in 1834 Ross was despatched to Socotra on a scouting mission to assess the feasibility of building a coaling depot for the company's steamships.

Ross' subsequent report, which was forwarded on to the Court of Directors in 1834, was a comprehensive overview of the island, its inhabitants, geography, and flora and fauna. In other words, Ross' report represented the type of intelligence-gathering operation which often preceded imperial and colonial expeditions. Commanders and statesmen needed an understanding of an area, as well as its local rulers and domestic politics, before they could draw up plans for potential settlements or calculate how many battalions they would need to deploy.

Ross' exhaustive report on Socotra provided the East India Company with a strategic overview of the island. In this particular case it concluded that there were no natural harbours truly suited for the construction of dockyards and coaling depots. On the basis of this conclusion, the Company decided against seizing Socotra and instead concentrated its efforts on developing a refuelling point at Aden. Nevertheless, it clearly illustrated the commercial interest in acquiring outposts in the Red Sea for navigation.

In fact, after establishing a virtual monopoly over the Suez to Bombay route, the P&O successfully lobbied the government to finance the construction of five lighthouses in the Red Sea to guide its ships through dangerous waters. In 1859 the company secretary wrote to Lord John Russell in the Foreign Office imploring the government to commit to building lighthouses on the most treacherous islands and shoals. The company stated:

it cannot be necessary, in addressing your Lordship, to refer at length to the extent to which the Red Sea has become the highway between Great Britain and her most important dependencies, or mention that the Steam Ships belonging to this Company alone now pass

¹² Ibid.

up and down that Sea as frequently as ten times per month laden with all that is most valuable as regards life, Mails and Despatches, and property.¹³

In the same letter, the company suggested that the Royal Navy steam survey vessel HMS *Cyclops* 'might perhaps be made useful' by undertaking a detailed survey of the islands requiring lights, and that navy hulks could be converted into lightships.¹⁴

A request for such a considerable level of government support for a heavily-subsidised private company during the heyday of free-trade and unfettered capitalism is remarkable, and the company's letter raised eyebrows in the government. As the secretary of the Privy Council's trade committee noted in a response to the Foreign Office, 'The principal parties to be benefited by the Lights are the Peninsular and Oriental Company...it may be doubtful whether it is expedient to expend a large sum of public money for the benefit of a Company who are already largely subsidised.'¹⁵ The committee added one caveat, however, stating that it did not recommend financing the Red Sea lighthouses 'unless Her Majesty's Government consider that there are peculiar circumstances connected with the Route to India and China which specially require that this route should be facilitated and rendered safe at the public cost'.¹⁶

In fact the government did feel that lighting the Red Sea route was a worthwhile measure, despite misgivings over the use of public money to fund a project for the benefit of a private company and some concerns over how this might affect Britain's relationship with the Sublime Porte.¹⁷ A Foreign Office memorandum summarising the Cabinet's discussion over the lighthouse question indicates that it was primarily the Admiralty and the India Board which supported the

¹³ National Archives, Kew, FO 78/1785, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses 1859-1863, Letter from the P&O Company Secretary to Lord John Russell, 8 September 1859.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Archives, Kew, FO 78/1785, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Letter from the Secretary of the Office of the Privy Council Committee for Trade to the Foreign Office, 24 September 1859.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ National Archives, Kew, FO 78/1785, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Foreign Office Memorandum to the Admiralty and India Office, 14 September 1857.

proposal – not entirely surprising given that these offices were responsible for securing the link with Britain’s possessions on the subcontinent.¹⁸ In November 1859, the British consul in Cairo reported to the Khedive’s government that five lighthouses would be constructed and manned by British engineers outside the Suez roadstead, Daedalus Shoal at the entrance of the Gulf of Suez, and on several key reefs.¹⁹

All of this might appear to suggest that capitalist enterprise was one of the initial drivers of British imperial expansion in the Red Sea region. The P&O seemingly succeeded in convincing the government to build a chain of lighthouses in the Red Sea, which represented a small but permanent British official presence in the region. It was also the East India Company which commissioned an intelligence briefing on Socotra in preparation for a possible (but later cancelled) naval station.

But this would be to misread the relationship between the state and the shipping. The British government was willing to cooperate with private enterprise in the Red Sea, provided that it was prepared to act as an imperial surrogate. The P&O was used by the British government for its own strategic ends to maintain the lines of communication and transportation with India. The P&O was contracted by the government to carry passengers and mail at reduced rates along the Bombay-Suez route, and in return received heavy subsidy from the British taxpayer. The closeness of the relationship between the P&O, as well as other publicly-supported European shipping lines, led technological historian Daniel Headrick to describe them as ‘quasi-official branches of their respective governments.’²⁰

Moreover, it must be noted that no actual territory was acquired by the government on behalf of either the East India Company or the P&O in the Red Sea. It is true that the lighthouses in the Red Sea were operated by British engineers, however, their existence did not imply British

¹⁸ National Archives, Kew, FO 78/1785, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Foreign Office Memorandum to the Admiralty and India Office, 29 September 1857.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Daniel Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40.

political control over the lonely rocks which theoretically remained possessions of the Ottoman Empire. Neither did the slow but steady increase in British shipping in the Red Sea mean that the government was prepared to purchase or conquer new territories in the region for the benefit of its shipping companies.

In fact, surviving government records make it clear that the attempt to light the Red Sea was driven by military and strategic interests. When they were constructed, the British lighthouses were placed under the control of first the Indian Navy, and then the Marine Survey of India.²¹ When in 1881 the French succeeded in persuading the Ottoman sultan to grant a concession to the French Collas Company to build 30 lighthouses in the Red Sea, there was consternation in London.²² This quickly turned to outrage when the company's directors announced they would be charging heavy dues on all ships passing the lights. The British ambassador in Constantinople, George Goschen, strenuously objected to the concession, stating that 'Her Majesty's Government were deeply interested in lighting the Red Sea; also, in that in this question there was no jealousy as between English and French, provided the lights were supplied efficiently and with the lowest possible charges on shipping'.²³ Goschen complained to the Ottoman government 'that English interests were suffering in several cases, where Frenchmen had obtained Concessions, and were uniting with the Turkish Government to impose heavier charges than were just on English trade and commerce,'²⁴ as he recalled in his report to the Foreign Secretary.

The subtext to this competition for lighthouses and disputes over tolls was of course political. The right to charge tolls implied political authority over the waters of the Red Sea, and the government could not permit France to challenge Britain's maritime control over one of its two

²¹ H.D. Jenkins, *Instructions for Sailing Through the Suez Canal with Notes on the Navigation of the Gulf of Suez & Red Sea* (London: E. James Imray & Son, 1893), 25.

²² National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Letter from Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, 3 September 1881.

²³ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Records: Correspondence Respecting the Lighthouses in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, Letter from George Goschen to Earl Granville, 11 March 1881.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

routes to India. As Goschen reported back to London, 'I told Michel Pasha in a friendly way, but in very uncompromising language, that I should recommend Her Majesty's Government to use all their influence to oppose his obtaining a Concession for the lighting of the Red Sea unless the Collas Company had previously...agreed to some solution of the Collas Lighthouse question satisfactory to Her Majesty's Government.'²⁵ Indeed, the question of lighting the Red Sea was even seen by the Italians in terms of Great Power manoeuvring, at a time when the government was attempting to bring Italy into the Red Sea as a counterbalance to France. The Italian Minister of Marine declared 'it would be absolutely necessary to establish a control over the administration of lighthouses by the Powers interested, so as to regulate the amount of dues,' according to the Italian ambassador in London.²⁶

The threat of 30 lighthouses under French control never materialised, although it did spur the British to pay for the construction of another lighthouse on a collection of barren islands called the Brothers near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.²⁷ The case of lighting the Red Sea clearly illustrates how government actions, apparently taken at the behest of private companies for private profit, were in fact driven by strategic interests. Lighthouses were not constructed simply for the benefit of the P&O's shareholders, but because the company was contracted as an agent of the British government to maintain its communication with India. In 1884, the Foreign Office's under-secretary of state, Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, admitted as much in Parliament when he declared that 'the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, like the Suez Canal, were British interests also, because they were the road to British India...[T]he maintenance of the lighthouses in the Red Sea had always been treated not merely from a commercial point of view, but also as a political question of great moment.'²⁸ British involvement

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Letter from M. Racchia to M. Depretis, 7 May 1888.

²⁷ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Records: Turkey, Turkish & Red Sea Lighthouses, Letter from Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, 3 September 1881.

²⁸ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, Speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1676.

in the Red Sea seemingly came as a consequence of its strategic interests, not purely as a result of Victorian capitalism.

The Opening of the Suez Canal

Given the increasing numbers of ships using the Red Sea prior to its opening, the completion of the Suez Canal by the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps in November 1869 promised to revolutionise patterns of world trade. Indeed, so much so that there were initially concerns in Britain that the canal would undermine what had become a largely unchallenged British monopoly in the Red Sea. Furthermore, although the canal would drastically shorten shipping times to the East, it also implied that France could act as the gatekeeper to the new route. After public calls to disrupt the canal's construction or to cut an alternate canal, the government decided it could not prevent Lesseps from completing his project. Shortly after it opened in November 1869, the Admiralty instead sent Sir Alexander Milne to inspect the canal and to comment on its use. In January 1870, Milne reported that 'though much remains to be done to improve and facilitate the transit, especially for large ships, yet it is at the present moment undeniably a navigable Canal for vessels of considerable draught and tonnage, and its success has probably far exceeded the most sanguine expectations of its warmest supporters.'²⁹ Milne also took care to note that the naval basin constructed at Suez would accommodate large frigates as well as the Indian troop transports, and that the commercial basin 'admits the largest ships of the Peninsular and Oriental Company to lie alongside.'³⁰

Milne also dismissed concerns that it would be difficult for steamships to navigate the Red Sea. He stated that 'with the exception of the iron-clad ship at present stationed in the East, or any

²⁹ National Maritime Museum, Caird Library & Archives, Milne Family papers, MLN/199/79, Report on the Maritime Canal connecting the Mediterranean at Port Said with the Red Sea and Suez, Sir Alexander Milne, 1 January 1870.

³⁰ Ibid.

unusually heavy vessel, it will be a channel available for the passage to and fro of our Indian and China squadrons.' Milne even calculated the savings which the Admiralty would make in coal purchases by sending its warships through the Suez Canal rather than around the Cape. The obvious subtext to Milne's report was that Britain could not afford to allow another power to control this new route.

The Suez Canal would prove to be immensely valuable for British maritime trade, albeit after a slow start. The total tonnage of British shipping passing through the canal in 1870 was 430,000, rising in 1875 to 2,000,000 and then 3,000,000 by 1880.³¹ From its start, the overwhelming majority of ships passing through the Suez Canal flew the Red Ensign, making this lucrative new trade route a *de facto* British one.³²

Although the new route did not immediately supplant the longer one around the Cape of Good Hope, it was still recognised as an important future communications artery. Political influence over Egypt was considered vital for securing this route. Following the opening of the Suez Canal, for example, an enquiry was held into the state of British trade. A spokesman from the War Office opined before RUSI shortly after the canal's completion:

My belief is that if a war broke out with France, their first step would be to seize Egypt...we ought to be prepared for such a race [from Malta & Bizerta] and have men and material ready to enable us to take possession of Alexandria and Port Said immediately on outbreak of war.³³

Similarly, the diary of John Wodehouse, the Earl of Kimberley, reveals that discussions about military control over Egypt and the canal began as early as May 1870. Kimberley had been appointed to the Colonial Office in 1870 by Gladstone after serving as the under-secretary of state for India and the

³¹ D.A. Farnie, *East and West of Suez 1854-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 751.

³² Ibid.

³³ Quoted in Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 171.

Viceroy of Ireland.³⁴ He was a committed Liberal, and as Colonial Secretary he would continue the party's policy of withdrawing Army garrisons from the colonies.³⁵

Nonetheless, Kimberley's recollection of a Cabinet meeting on 29 May 1870 suggests that senior figures within Gladstone's first government were eager to assert British control over the newly-constructed canal. As he wrote in his journal, 'Childers [the First Lord of the Admiralty] is hot for neutralization of the canal on the basis of a free passage for troops & war vessels of all belligerents. Gladstone acutely observed that this meant that we were to have a free use of the passage under the guise of a general freedom.'³⁶ Kimberley himself believed that 'there is no harm trying for this neutralization but I expect other nations will say "don't you wish you may get it" – In case of a great war between us & France or France & the US combined, it will be a race to get possession of Egypt.'³⁷ For Kimberley the key was to remain 'masters of the sea on either side of the canal,' which would turn it into 'a mere trap for our enemies.'³⁸ But he was careful to note that as a form of insurance, 'we ought I think to keep our stations on the Cape route such as Mauritius secure from sudden attack,'³⁹ because if the Mediterranean were ever to be lost, the Suez route would be 'useless.'⁴⁰

Kimberley's diary entry is noteworthy because whilst he was still serving as Colonial Secretary in 1873, Sir Bartle Frere, the former governor of Bombay who had been sent as an envoy to the Sultanate of Zanzibar to negotiate an anti-slaving trade treaty,⁴¹ began sending letters back to

³⁴ John Powell, 'Wodehouse, John, first earl of Kimberley (1826–1902)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2010 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36987, accessed 5 Aug 2016].

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Angus Hawkins and John Powell, eds., *The Journal of John Wodehouse First Earl of Kimberley, 1862-1902*, vol. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ John Benyon, 'Frere, Sir (Henry) Bartle Edward, first baronet (1815–1884)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10171, accessed 5 Aug 2016].

London urging the government to take steps to secure British interests around Aden. Frere was already beginning to gain a reputation as an empire-builder,⁴² and he took it upon himself as part of his voyage to Zanzibar to provide commentary to the government on the state of Britain's imperial interests in the Gulf of Aden. At this time Aden was still a dependency of the Bombay Presidency, from which Frere had recently returned as governor. He was therefore well aware of how important its dockyard and coaling station were to Indian and Imperial interests.⁴³ He warned the government that Aden's defences were outdated and left the port vulnerable to sudden attack, and he also alerted Whitehall about the advance of Ottoman forces into southern Arabia. Frere believed they were attempting to establish firmer control over the Yemeni tribes, and could potentially threaten the port from its northern side.

Frere's letters reached Kimberley, who on 10 January 1873 sent a request to Lord Northbrook, then Viceroy of India, to instruct the British resident in Aden to issue a protest at the Ottoman moves towards Aden.⁴⁴ Kimberley also warned Lord Granville, the Foreign Secretary, about the Turkish advance towards Aden. The following day, Granville telegraphed the British ambassador in Constantinople, Sir Henry Elliot, to tell the Porte that 'any such movement would be viewed in a serious light by Her Majesty's Government as calculated to interfere with the British territory of Aden...You will request the Porte to send immediate orders to its Authorities to suspend hostile operations in that quarter.'⁴⁵ Periodic warnings which had been sent from the Residency in Aden had previously been ignored by London or confined to the Bombay and Indian governments. Acutely aware of the importance of its maritime connection to London, by 1873, the Indian Imperial Government's Foreign Department 'had begun to share the Aden Residency's distaste of any foreign presence in the Gulf of Aden.'⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Robert Walter Canning Large, 'The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905', PhD Thesis, June 1974, SOAS University of London, 3.27.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Ibid., 3.33

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.39

Perhaps the most well-known intervention to secure the new Suez route, however, came two years later when in 1875 Benjamin Disraeli orchestrated the dramatic purchase of the majority of the Suez Canal Company shares. After being informed by Derby that the Khedive Ismail was interested in selling his shares to help pay down the enormous Egyptian national debt, Disraeli famously pounced on the opportunity to purchase a controlling interest in the canal in November 1875 aided by a loan from Lionel de Rothschild. After purchasing the shares through a private loan, Disraeli was forced to get Parliament's approval retroactively for the funds to pay back the loan. Explaining his decision before the House in February 1876, Disraeli declared,

I have always, and do now recommend it to the country as a political transaction, and one which I believe is calculated to strengthen the Empire. That is the spirit in which it has been accepted by the country, which understands it though the two right hon. critics may not. They are really seasick of the "Silver Streak." They want the Empire to be maintained, to be strengthened; they will not be alarmed even it be increased. **Because they think we are obtaining a great hold and interest in this important portion of Africa—because they believe that it secures to us a highway to our Indian Empire and our other dependencies,** the people of England have from the first recognized the propriety and the wisdom of the step which we shall sanction tonight.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Parliament approved Disraeli's decision and agreed to provide the funds which he had already spent. What is significant was the explicit reference in Disraeli's speech to the Commons to the strategic value not only of the canal, but to portions of the African continent itself.

By presenting northeastern Africa in terms of the protection of imperial lines of communication, Disraeli's purchase of the canal helped to establish the idea that any measures to secure the line were justifiable in the name of imperial security. As Seeley, Froude, and Dilke would prophesise, Britain's future as a Great Power depended on these waterways to link the Empire together. Despite reservations about expanding the Empire, Disraeli's action showed that British

⁴⁷ Benjamin Disraeli, Speech to the House of Commons, 21 February 1876, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 227 (1876), 661. Emphasis added.

statesmen in the future could be prepared to annex African territory if deemed necessary for imperial security. As will be discussed in Chapter IV, many of the men who advised Disraeli to purchase the canal shares would later advise Gladstone to go further and annex coastal territory in the Red Sea.

Later that same year, in fact, the Foreign Office began requesting that Royal Navy ships in the Red Sea, either on deployment or in transit, stop at the various ports in the sea and show the flag. As the First Lord told Parliament in July 1876, 'at the commencement of the year, at the instance of the Foreign Office, instructions were given to some of the smaller ships of war, whether outward or homeward bound, to call at the Red Sea ports, if prevailing winds and other circumstances would permit.'⁴⁸

The outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877 underscored the new importance of the Suez route to British interests. After the commencement of hostilities, the Admiralty sent a squadron of six ironclads to Port Said at the northern entrance to the Suez Canal, 'the first such despatch of a foreign naval force to the Canal in history.'⁴⁹ Not only did the Russo-Turkish War cause Britain to reject a previous proposal to neutralise the canal during wartime,⁵⁰ but it also had the effect of driving up traffic through the Red Sea. With the Russo-Persian trade corridor cut, shipments of tea from China to Russia were diverted through the canal, and grain previously exported from the Black Sea ports was replaced with corn from India.⁵¹ The severing of the trade route from Persia north into Russia doubled the amount of British shipping travelling between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, and the British merchant marine alone emerged from the

⁴⁸ George Hunt (First Lord of the Admiralty), Speech to the House of Commons, 24 July 1876, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 230 (1876), 1815.

⁴⁹ Farnie, *East and West of Suez*, 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

economic recession of 1878 relatively unscathed.⁵² The slump in competition meant that by early 1879, 80 per cent of all ships transiting the Suez Canal were British.⁵³

As a result, the state of Britain's naval power in the Red Sea started to attract the attention of navalists in Parliament, who felt it was important to improve the Royal Navy's position in the region. In a speech calling for more funds to be devoted to colonial defence and naval construction, the lawyer-turned-naval expert Thomas Brassey, for example, suggested that instead of investing in grand battleships, the Admiralty instead should focus on building coast defence ships, which 'while less costly than the large ships, would be better adapted to the practical exigencies of the naval service in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Straits of Singapore, and in other confined waters where we have great interests at stake.'⁵⁴

Brassey also criticised the government's lack of action on establishing fortified naval stations abroad. As he stated, 'We have as yet done nothing for the defence of our Colonial possessions by the creation of those centres of naval power to which the Committee on Designs directed attention as the most effective means of affording naval protection to our Colonial trade.'⁵⁵ Importantly, Brassey called for the amalgamation of various colonial and maritime defence schemes as well as shipbuilding policy into a single proposal. 'The better plan would be to consider the whole question of the defences of our foreign trade and Colonial harbours, and to vote a lump sum for carrying out their recommendations,' he argued.⁵⁶

Brassey's argument was welcomed by John Hay, the Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet. Hay had been elected to Parliament first in 1866, and would be sent to Cyprus with a squadron of battleships to take formal control of the island for the British government under the terms of the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 280.

⁵⁴ Thomas Brassey, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 March 1878, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 238 (1878), 1091.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Treaty of Berlin in 1878.⁵⁷ Hay also grasped the implications of the naval coal supply, because most warships could only travel a maximum distance of 1,500 miles before having to turn back and refuel. This limit on their range meant that 'it was, therefore, exceedingly desirable that, in the event of war, they should possess a coaling station between Malta and Aden, in order to protect the Suez Canal and serve as a steppingstone on the road to India.'⁵⁸ As Hay noted, a naval base near the Suez Canal would be 'of the greatest advantage as a naval and coaling station, [and] would prove highly useful for the protection of...trade.'⁵⁹ He pointed out to his colleagues, 'It must be remembered that while Port Said offered a coaling station during peace, it would be neutral territory during war, and therefore not available as a coaling station for our ships either stationed in the Levant, or on their way to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.'⁶⁰

Hay's support for imperial defence of the Suez-Red Sea line was important because he took a naval commander's view of Britain's strategic priorities at sea. Furthermore, after his mission to Cyprus in 1879, Hay would be appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet.⁶¹ As Commander-in-Chief, he oversaw the running of a specially-formed squadron of cruisers in the Red Sea. Furthermore, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV, he was responsible for the actions of Captain Robert Molyneux who commanded the squadron and who helped paved the way for the establishment of permanent British garrisons along the Red Sea littoral. The two men corresponded frequently, and the letters between them make it clear that Hay was closely managing Molyneux.

Another important aspect of Hay's speech was his referencing of a paper which had been presented to RUSI. He cited 'a very able Paper which had gained the gold medal at the United

⁵⁷ Andrew Lambert, 'Hay, Lord John (1827–1916)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50215>, accessed 9 Aug 2016].

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lambert, 'Hay, Lord John (1827–1916)'.

Service Institute,⁶² to support his claim that a coaling station between Malta and Aden was necessary for Britain's naval interests. By this time, RUSI had become something of a further education institution for serving officers, and Hay's comment indicated that this could include senior naval officers. Some of the first ideas about imperial defence were published by the Colomb brothers in the institute, and evidently Hay bridged the gap between strategic theory and practical naval policy when it came to imperial defence.

Finally, supporting both Brassey and Hay in the debate was Robert Bourke, the Conservative under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, and the Foreign Office's representative in the Commons. Bourke was appointed to his position in 1874 by Disraeli, and because both foreign secretaries during his tenure were peers, it was Bourke's responsibility to defend the government's foreign policy in the Commons.⁶³ Furthermore, it was during his time in office that the Eastern Question came to a head, and so it is reasonable to assume that Bourke would have been intimately involved in the discussions over Britain's posture towards Russia in the eastern Mediterranean.

Bourke began by acknowledging that the Russo-Turkish War had caused 'an enormous change in the power of Turkey.'⁶⁴ This shift in the regional balance of power, he believed, made it 'absolutely necessary that Her Majesty's Government should, in view of future events, have at their command in that part of the world a place where a harbour could be made.'⁶⁵ He suggested that the government 'wanted a harbour which would be a means of safety in case of the Suez Canal being threatened, and which could be the basis of future operations in case their communications with India were threatened.'⁶⁶ Bourke's comments are particularly noteworthy because of his position in the Foreign Office. His speech before Parliament indicates a certain level of official support from the government to the idea of establishing a permanent British presence near the Suez Canal for the

⁶² Sir John Hay, Speech to the House of Commons, 24 March 1879.

⁶³ Robert Bourke, Speech to the House of Commons, 24 March 1879, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 244 (1879), 1534.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

purposes of imperial security. The speeches quoted above demonstrate a significant consensus amongst a certain set of decisionmakers that Britain needed to play a more active role in securing the Suez Canal now that the Ottomans could not be relied upon to hold the Russian flank in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Further evidence to support the idea that Britain was seeking to dominate the seas surrounding the canal comes from one of Gladstone's speeches during his 1878-1880 Midlothian Campaign. In December 1879 he spoke in St. Andrew's Hall at the University of Glasgow, urging his audience to reject the new imperialism of Disraeli's Conservative Party, dismissing the security justifications for annexing territory surrounding the canal. The speech is worth quoting at length, because by arguing against the case for taking African and Mediterranean territory in the name of imperial security, Gladstone revealed that there was in fact a section of public and official opinion inclined in this direction.

He began with a general criticism of the idea that greater security could be gained by the annexation of territory or the purchase of the canal shares:

But besides this, gentlemen, there was another object to be gained by the possession of Cyprus, and that was—it was to be a safeguard of the road to India. Now I want to say a word, if you will allow me, upon this safe-guarding of the road to India. I want to know what is the meaning of that claim. In the principles of foreign policy, gentlemen, as I have professed them from my youth, it is a fundamental article that we are to set up no claim for ourselves which we do not allow to others, and that he who departs from that principle is committing treason against public law, and the peace and order of the world. What is the meaning of safeguarding the road to India? It seems to mean this; that a little island at one end of the world, having possessed itself of an enormous territory at the other end of the world, is entitled to say with respect to every land and every sea lying between its own shores and any part of that enormous possession, that it has a preferential right to the possession or control of that intermediate territory, in order, as it is called, to safe-guard the road to India. That, gentlemen, is a monstrous claim.

We have no title with regard to any land or any sea, other than that within the allegiance of her Majesty, except titles equal to those of all other Powers. Do not suppose that I am saying that the route to India is a matter of no importance. This doctrine of safe-guarding the road to India began with the purchase of the shares in the Suez Canal, and I must say that manœuvre was most successful. I do not deny, I confess with sorrow, that though I with some others resisted it from the first, it was admirably devised for hoodwinking the people of the country, for catching them on their weak side; and it did carry with it undoubtedly approval at the time. But, gentlemen, it was a mere delusion. No doubt the Suez Canal is of importance; but if war breaks out, and if the channel of the Suez Canal becomes vital or material to your communications with India, you will not secure it one bit the better because you have been foolish enough to acquire a certain number of shares in the Canal. You must secure it by the strong hand. You must secure it by the superiority of your naval power. That superiority would secure it whether you are a proprietor in the Canal or not, and will not secure it a bit the better because you have chosen to complicate your already too complicated transactions with a new financial operation of that ridiculous description.⁶⁷

Gladstone continued with his attack on the Conservatives by criticising the decision to annex Cyprus as part of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin:

But, gentlemen, suppose that I am entirely wrong; suppose purchase of the shares in the Suez Canal was the desire of the consummate human wisdom; suppose that you are entitled to lay hands on all the countries that lie between you and India, under the pretext of what is called safe-guarding the road to India. Does the island of Cyprus safe-guard the road to India? Nothing of the sort, gentlemen. It is 300 miles off the road to India. How in the world, if the question of maintaining the road to India depends upon possessing the Suez Canal, how in the world are you the better by choosing to encumber yourselves with the trust and the defence of a foreign island, with people of another race not sympathizing in your purposes, not connected with your nationality, and lying more than 300 miles from the point—not simply from the point, but off the route to the point—where your naval force is to be applied? Well, gentlemen, the truth is this, that Cyprus is to us—whatever it may be in itself, it is to us a valueless encumbrance. The getting of it offended Europe. The getting of it, I do not hesitate to say, was even a wrong to Turkey. The governing of it by despotic means has been dishonourable to the British Power; and the fact that it is valueless does not in the

⁶⁷ William Gladstone, 'Speech in St. Andrew's Hall,' University of Glasgow, 5 December 1879.

least exempt us from the responsibility of the transaction. No doubt it was a possession gotten by a clandestine treaty, in violation of public law; and whether it be precious, or whether it be worthless, if it was so gotten by clandestine means and in breach of public law, the getting of it is a deed as much tainted with secrecy and corruption as was that which sent forth Gehazi from the presence of Elisha a leper white as snow.⁶⁸

Gladstone's comments clearly demonstrate the fact that the Conservatives under Disraeli had seized first the Suez Canal, and then the island of Cyprus in the name of imperial security, and that at least a segment of the British electorate supported these actions. The speech also showed that even Gladstone, the archetype of the Manchester School of Mid-Victorian liberalism, had to accept to some extent the necessity of safeguarding the imperial lifelines. This would be particularly important in 1884 and 1885 when he would authorise two military expeditions into Eastern Sudan.

Undersea Telegraph Cables

In addition to the Red Sea's surface, the seabed became progressively more important for the British as a communications channel during this period. The introduction of gutta-percha coating for the electric telegraph enabled wires to be laid along the ocean floor, crossing vast distance relatively safe from interruption. Telegraphic communication between Britain and the scattered possessions in turn promised to bind them closer to London and to enable the political integration of the Empire on global scale. Moreover, the outbreak of conflicts such as the Indian Mutiny and the Zulu War illustrated the importance of timely alerts so that reinforcements could be despatched quickly from the British Isles to trouble spots whenever they were needed.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The proposal to lay an undersea cable from Britain to India through the Middle East was first recommended by a Select Committee of Parliament in 1834.⁶⁹ Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India, had been a particularly enthusiastic proponent of innovating communication links with Britain, declaring that he would ‘promote its progress and to obtain for India an advantage so great in all its direct and indirect consequences that in my opinion it would be cheaply bought at any price.’⁷⁰ In 1855, the British government agreed in principle that it would support the laying of an undersea wire through the Red Sea, primarily because the proposed route promised to link London with Malta, Alexandria, and Corfu – all key locations for the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.⁷¹

The following extension of the line from Alexandria to Bombay was a joint project between the government and the East India Company.⁷² The outbreak of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 had given the government an extra impetus to establish a telegraphic connection with India to prevent similar disasters from occurring in the future, and the government in London was particularly anxious that it would not be caught unaware again in the event of another insurrection.⁷³ Once the crisis in India had been put under control, in 1858 the Treasury agreed to guarantee the interest on the second phase of the line from Alexandria to Bombay.⁷⁴

In order to repeat the signal over the line from London to Bombay, booster stations first had to be constructed at Suez, Koesir, and Aden in 1859 before the cable could be laid.⁷⁵ The actual cable laying operation was carried out by a contractor, Messrs. Newall, who declared that ‘their only

⁶⁹ British Library, India Office Records, Board’s Collections: 1830s, IOR/F/4/1730, Memorial of the inhabitants of Calcutta to the Court of Directors praying for the establishment of a regular steamship communication between England and India by way of the Red Sea, 5 March 1835.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Ibid.

⁷¹ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, Historical Summary of Telegraphic Communication with India, 1898.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, General Sir R. Murdoch Smith, ‘Sketch of the History of Telegraphic Communication between the United Kingdom and India,’ *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 13 December 1883.

⁷⁴ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, Treasury Minute, 17 July 1858.

⁷⁵ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, Historical Summary of Telegraphic Communication with India, 1898.

motive for seeking this concession was a conviction that the line would form a chief link in the system of telegraphic communication to Alexandria and India...[and] there was very little doubt that the large capital required for the project could be raised without difficulty.⁷⁶ But despite these assurances, Newall proved to be an unwise choice to carry out the project. In an attempt to skim the funds allocated for the copper cable, Newall deliberately laid the wire without any slack to cut down on the amount required and did not cover the wire with proper protection. The unarmoured cable lay suspended between the underwater peaks and across the central canyon of the Red Sea's jagged seafloor.⁷⁷ The huge weight created by the accumulation of molluscs and other sea creatures attracted to the unarmoured wire caused it to snap. The entire line failed in 1860, leaving the government with a total debt of £800,000.⁷⁸

The abject failure of the Red Sea and India Telegraph Company temporarily dissuaded the government from supporting any future undersea cable ventures in the Red Sea. The obvious necessity of connecting India with a cable though led the government to look at overland connections in 1861. By 1865 a working line had been established between London and Karachi across the Ottoman Empire and through the Persian Gulf. But reliant on local operators to relay messages across the Middle East, the line was rendered almost unusable by the garbled messages which were passed along by untrained Turkish clerks.⁷⁹ The disappointing results of the overland telegraphic route led the government to once again consider investing in an undersea cable through the Red Sea.

The Treasury did acknowledge in 1866 the successful laying of the trans-Atlantic cable, and remarked that the creation of a direct submarine cable to India was now once again a distinct

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*, 101

⁷⁸ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, General Sir R. Murdoch Smith, 'Sketch of the History of Telegraphic Communication between the United Kingdom and India,' *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 13 December 1883.

⁷⁹ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, General Sir R. Murdoch Smith, 'Sketch of the History of Telegraphic Communication between the United Kingdom and India,' *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 13 December 1883.

possibility.⁸⁰ Advances in technology meant that undersea cables were much better protected from the corrosive effects of salt water and parasitic shipworms which attempted to bore into them. Indeed, by 1868 it was clear that Britain's future communication network would be dependent on undersea cables. This was reflected in a guarantee issued by the government to the Submarine Telegraph Company (which operated the cables between Britain and mainland Europe) that it would repair any of the company's undersea wires which might be damaged.⁸¹

Noting these developments, in 1870 the great telegraph cable magnate John Pender financed the laying of a second undersea cable through the Red Sea. On 14 July 1870, the cable was laid, linking Suez with Aden and establishing the first functioning undersea line between Britain and India.⁸² Pender followed this up in 1872 by merging the British Indian Submarine Telegraph Company which had laid the wire with his Falmouth, Gibraltar and Malta to form the Eastern Telegraph Company (ETC), the largest telegraph company in the world.⁸³

With the addition of the ETC to his existing holdings, Pender and his partner and company chairman William Hay, Marquess of Tweeddale, now controlled a vast communications empire. From his office in Moorgate, Pender operated 20 per cent of the world's commercial cable traffic, and two-thirds of all British cable wires.⁸⁴ Pender's undersea network was centred on the Red Sea which acted as a spine for the electronic nervous system which flowed from West to East. Extensions from Aden to Durban and from India to China and Australia only added to the importance of the main wire running through the Red Sea. Such was the influence of the Eastern Telegraph Company that Headrick termed it 'one of the pillars of British commercial and strategic power.'⁸⁵

⁸⁰ BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, Historical Summary of Telegraphic Communication with India, 1898.

⁸¹ BT Archives, London, Agreement between Her Majesty's Postmaster General and the Submarine Telegraph Company, POST 30/374B, 11 July 1868.

⁸² BT Archives, London, Telegraphic Communication with India, 1857-1915, POST 30/2395C, Historical Summary of Telegraphic Communication with India, 1898.

⁸³ Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*, 104.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Given his position as the world's postmaster, Pender enjoyed a close relationship with important government figures.⁸⁶ When, for example, the line connecting London and India was completed in 1870, a grand party was held at Pender's private home in Piccadilly attended by a constellation of European royalty and important British officials. The highlight of the evening came when the Prince of Wales tapped out the first message to the Viceroy of India and received a reply within five minutes, changing 'for ever the relationship of governor and governed.'⁸⁷ His partner, the chairman of the ETC was also, in fact, brother of Lord John Hay, who in 1872 was appointed second in command of the Channel Fleet and commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1883.⁸⁸ Between 1868 and 1871, Lord John Hay sat on the Admiralty Board whilst his brother's Red Sea submarine cable was being laid, and in 1880 was made second naval lord by the Earl of Northbrook.⁸⁹

In 1872, Pender himself was even sent to Parliament as the Liberal MP for Wick, where he would remain until 1885,⁹⁰ along with both the ETC chairman William Hay and his brother John.⁹¹ Under Pender's leadership, the ETC often acted as an extension of the British state. In 1878, Pender's son persuaded the Cape Colony and Natal to agree to connect to the ETC network by means of a branch line from Aden to Durban, which the British government decided to subsidise following the outbreak of the Zulu War in 1879.⁹² During the 1882 crisis in Egypt, Pender offered to reroute the overland wire from Suez to Alexandria by laying a cable through the Suez Canal as a means bypassing the Egyptian link in the imperial network and creating an 'all-red' route to the East.⁹³ When in 1884 a rebellion first broke out in the Eastern Sudan, the Egyptian government

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Anita McConnell, 'Pender, Sir John (1816–1896)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21831>, accessed 19 Dec 2016].

⁸⁸ Andrew Lambert, 'Hay, Lord John (1827–1916)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50215>, accessed 19 Dec 2016].

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Daniel Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2012), 56.

⁹³ McConnell, 'Pender, Sir John (1816–1896)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

turned to Pender to lay a new cable from Suez to the port of Suakin, setting the stage for the British intervention in the port which will be discussed at length in Chapter IV.⁹⁴

In return, the British government assisted the ETC by conducting surveys of the ocean floor where cable was to be laid⁹⁵ and, beginning in 1878, offered subsidies on the ETC's imperial lines.⁹⁶ It is not a coincidence that the development of the ETC network occurred as British strategists became increasingly obsessed with the idea of creating an 'all-red' telegraph route to connect Britain with all the major corners of the Empire. Indeed, even before the outbreak of the Arabi Revolt in Egypt in 1882, the Foreign Office was investigating the possibility of sinking a cable through the Suez Canal to cut out the overland link to Alexandria. In 1880, Sir Edward Hertslet, the Foreign Office's resident Middle East expert wrote that a cable 'constantly under the surveillance of British vessels of war in the Red Sea, would not be liable to the same objections as a land-line through any part of the Egyptian territory.'⁹⁷ Significantly, he added, 'Souakin, at which port or in its vicinity the telegraph land-line would thus cease, is a place of great and rising importance,'⁹⁸ foreshadowing Britain's virtual annexation of the port in 1884.

The closeness of key ETC board members with the British political establishment ensured that the government could utilise the ETC's sprawling network of submarine cables as if they were another public service such as the armed forces. Government messages, for example, were given priority over other messages on ETC cables and were preceded with the authoritative signal 'clear the line, clear the line.'⁹⁹ As the one of the government's contracted electronic mails carriers, the ETC could expect assistance in surveying new routes and subsidies for the unprofitable but politically

⁹⁴ National Maritime Museum, Caird Library & Archives, Goodsall Papers, GDL/6, Logbook of SS Chiltern cable laying in the Red Sea, December 1883 - February 1884.

⁹⁵ Hull, 'The Unserved World, 1874,' *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 61.

⁹⁶ Headrick, *Tentacles of Progress*, 101.

⁹⁷ Sir E. Hertslet, "Memorandum on the Italian Claim to Sovereignty over Assab Bay," Foreign Office, 9 June 1880. In RN Schofield, ed., *The Red Sea Region: Sovereignty, Boundaries & Conflict, 1839-1967*, vol. 1. *Arabian Geopolitics 6 Regional Documentary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 459.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Geoffrey Berridge, *British Diplomacy in Turkey, 1583 to the Present: A Study in the Evolution of the Resident Embassy* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009), 110.

important routes to distant imperial territories. Pender and the ETC in effect created the Empire-wide submarine communications system necessary for crafting an integrated imperial defence policy, the spinal cord of which ran through the Red Sea connecting the Atlantic and Indian Ocean networks. Inspired by the image of these wires snaking their way across the vast, unlit alluvial plains of the world's oceans, Kipling wrote vividly of the 'shell-burred' cables in the 'deserts of the deep', which whispered the message "'let us be one'".¹⁰⁰

The mid-Victorian Royal Navy in the Red Sea

Before and immediately after the opening of the Suez Canal, the Royal Navy's activity in the Red Sea was mostly confined to anti-slave trade operations. A permanent naval force was deemed necessary for the defence of India, but in the absence of any serious rivals in the Indian Ocean, the Royal Navy's frigates and gunboats were free to chase down dhows carrying slaves from Africa to Arabia. A regular patrol in the Red Sea was first created during this period.

The crusade against the slave trade has been blamed by some historians for helping to lay the foundation for British and European imperialism on the African continent. Richard Wolff, for example, argued that 'the evolving interaction of British imperialism in the nineteenth century and the slave trade in East Africa led ultimately to the decision to annex and colonize several territories there.'¹⁰¹ This interpretation, however, inverts the power dynamic and overestimates the amount of resources devoted to the anti-slavery project. Although efforts to eradicate the slavery may have provided the impetus or the justification for imperial annexations elsewhere during the nineteenth century, this was not the case in the Red Sea. The Royal Navy's campaign against the slave trade was possible only because it was already the dominant force in the region, and even then so small was

¹⁰⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling: The Complete Verse*, ed. MM Kay (London: Kyle Cathie, 2002), 138.

¹⁰¹ Wolff, 'British Imperialism and the East African Slave Trade,' 443.

the number of ships deployed on anti-slavery missions, by 1868 only a mere five per cent of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean had been disrupted.¹⁰²

The Royal Navy established a permanent presence off the East African coast following the abolition of the Indian Navy in 1863. Although the Indian Navy had previously functioned as an independent service, the Admiralty decided in 1863 that local Indian marine forces would only be permitted to operate within a three-mile limit of the coastline. Any blue-water operations in the Indian Ocean would be reserved exclusively for the Royal Navy. These operations included carrying out regular patrols in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea as well as enforcement of the embargo on the slave trade off the East African coast.¹⁰³ In return, the Admiralty guaranteed that the 'Senior Royal Naval officer on the East Indies and China Station...should be placed in communication with the Governments of India and Bombay, and be instructed to meet as far as possible any demands for Naval operations which might be made upon him by either of those Governments.'¹⁰⁴

Royal Navy ships assigned to cruises of the Red Sea received a set of specific guidelines. Captains were ordered to 'give every consideration to the requisitions which may be made to you for assistance or co-operation on any task deemed beneficial to Trade, or in legal support of the authority representing Her Majesty's Government.'¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, they were instructed to 'take every opportunity of communication with the Senior Office in the Mozambique Channel, in order that the two squadrons may act in concert in their endeavours to suppress the Slave Trade.'¹⁰⁶ At this stage ships were not deployed permanently to the Red Sea but were assigned only to regular patrols – the climate being thought too extreme for British crews during the region's hot summers.

¹⁰² Daniel Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism*. London: IB Tauris, 2015), 50.

¹⁰³ British Library, India Office Records, L/MIC/7/1848, Military Collection, History of the legal relations between the Government of India and the India Marine, 1868.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ F. Montrésor, 'Special instructions for the guidance of captains and commanders of HM Ships and vessels when on detached service in the Red Sea or Persian Gulf,' East Indies Station, 1863. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 3 (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993), 263.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

An absence of much official correspondence regarding the early activities of these Red Sea patrols suggests that they were undertaken only on an occasional basis. Before the opening of the Suez Canal and the laying of the undersea cable to India, the Red Sea remained a relatively calm and untroubled backwater, politically-speaking. The majority of official correspondence during the 1860s relates to anti-slavery sweeps in the Persian Gulf and off the Zanzibar archipelago, where the East Indies squadron concentrated its efforts on interdicting slave ships.

By contrast, the few confirmed deployments to the Red Sea in the 1860s consisted initially of *ad-hoc* missions requested by local officials. This was reflected in the testimony given by an under-secretary of state at the India Office to a select committee of Parliament during a debate over the subsidy to be paid by Indian government for its naval protection. The official stated:

In the Persian Gulf, and in the neighbouring waters, where embarrassments sometimes arise suddenly and require to be promptly dealt with, it would be necessary to have vessels always ready for service, at the call of the local authorities. In the Bay of Bengal and the Red Sea it might not be necessary to the same extent for the Indian authorities to be enabled promptly to regulate the movements of Her Majesty's vessels; but a general power to call those service when they might be required should be recognised by the Admiralty, and the officers on the station should be instructed to attend to the requisitions made by the Viceroy.¹⁰⁷

As the de Lesseps' canal neared completion towards the end of the 1860s, these missions became a means of gathering intelligence on potential sites where other European powers might be eager to stake their claims for harbours and naval stations.

In October 1868, for example, Edward Russell, the Resident at Aden, ordered HMS *Dryad* to Sheikh Seyed, a bay opposite Perim on the Arabian side of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, after hearing

¹⁰⁷ Parliamentary Committee on the Annual Subsidy Paid by the Indian Government to the Admiralty for the Maintenance of a Naval Force in Indian Waters, Report of the Committee, 26 September 1876. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 6 (Chippenham: Archive Editions), 99.

rumours that a French agent was attempting to purchase the harbour from the local chieftain.¹⁰⁸ In his instructions to Captain Philip Colomb, then commanding the *Dryad*, he explained, 'As it undesirable in my opinion that any European power should occupy this position, situated as it is with reference to Perim and the Straits, I am anxious to gain some knowledge of the harbour or bay to ascertain its capabilities as an anchorage and its position generally and whether it is likely to be made available as a point of obstruction to British interests.'¹⁰⁹ Upon his return from Sheikh Seyed, Colomb was able to report that, 'In my opinion the place is utterly unsuited for a Government depot nor could it, if occupied by a hostile Power, provide more than a nominal inconvenience to us. As an obstruction to the navigation of the Red Sea, such as occupation would be futile.'¹¹⁰

Similarly, in January 1869 Russell sent HMS *Star* to gather intelligence on Assab Bay, which had recently been purchased by the Rubattino Shipping Company on the orders of the Italian government for the purpose of constructing a coaling station. The subsequent report submitted by *Star's* captain contained information on local tides, wind patterns, and soundings which were taken in the roadstead. Captain de Kantzen concluded that 'I am of the opinion that Assab Bay is only useful to station...a disabled ship, to refit it as a Coaling station it would be useless...its possession even by a Hostile Power could only be a nominal inconvenience to us.'¹¹¹ Russell forwarded all of this information on to London, along with reports of all foreign warships then anchored in Aden harbour and a further warning about possible French activity in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.¹¹² Russell also petitioned the Admiralty for a battery of heavy guns.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Edward Russell, Resident at Aden to Captain Colomb, 31 October 1868, letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 3 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 420.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Philip Colomb, Captain Colomb to the Resident at Aden, 8 November 1868, letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 3 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 422.

¹¹¹ de Kantzen, Commander de Kantzen to Resident at Aden, 11 January 1869, Report on Assab Bay. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 3. (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 511.

¹¹² Thomas Marston, *Britain's Imperial Role in the Red Sea Area, 1800-1878* (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1961), 388.

¹¹³ Ibid.

With the apparent lack of any credible threats to British paramountcy at this stage, however, and under pressure from domestic anti-slave trade groups, the government in London remained fixated on the navy's campaign against the slave trade. Much of the effort had previously been concentrated around Zanzibar, the main hub for slave ships trading between East Africa and Arabia. But beginning in 1874, the Admiralty required all captains conducting cruises through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to submit regular reports on the state of the local slave trade. The following year, for the first time the government faced calls in Parliament to create a permanent squadron in the Red Sea for the purpose of interrupting the slave trade route from the Red Sea ports to Jeddah.¹¹⁴

In response, the Admiralty agreed to require gunboats of the East Indies Squadron to call at the Red Sea ports whenever they transited through the Suez Canal. The log of HMS *Wild Swan*, for example, reveals that on her voyage to Aden from the Mediterranean in 1877, she stopped at Suakin and Massawa to investigate the state of the slave trade. Her captain reported to the station commander-in-chief that 'Both at Suakin and Massawa it is stated that the Slave Trade has much diminished all along the Western shores of the Red Sea; and that the Egyptian Government are making real efforts to suppress it entirely.'¹¹⁵ The following year, a letter of proceedings sent by the commander-in-chief of the station back to London shows that three of the gunboats on the station were assigned to patrols outside the harbours of Massawa, Jeddah, and Zeyla to prevent slave dhows from crossing to Arabia.¹¹⁶

Even as late as 1880s, the navy perceived its role in the Red Sea to act merely as an anti-slaving police force. When asked for recommendations for further operations in the sea, for

¹¹⁴ Robert Hanbury, Speech to the House of Commons, 8 July 1875, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. 225 (1875), 1159.

¹¹⁵ Armand T. Powlett, Commander Powlett to Captain Bosanquet, 20 November 1877, Letter of Proceedings. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 4. (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993), 197.

¹¹⁶ John Corbett, Commander-in-Chief East Indies to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 1 January 1878, General Letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 4. (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993), 254.

example, captains simply called for more ships to be deployed to better sever the trade link between Africa and Arabia.¹¹⁷ By 1878, two ships were more-or-less permanently assigned to patrolling the ports of the Red Sea for slavers, and John Corbett, the commander-in-chief of the East Indies station, warned the Admiralty that a third might even be necessary.¹¹⁸

The Admiralty remained reluctant, however, to form a permanent station in the Red Sea on account of the hot weather, exposure to which over long periods was thought to 'very seriously affect the health, and in many cases, endanger the lives of Officers and Men.'¹¹⁹ A report from the Admiralty noted, 'As the hot season in the Red Sea is approaching, My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty deem it desirable to consider the question of withdrawing Her Majesty's Ships during the hottest period.'¹²⁰ The report stated that 'their Lordships desire that the existing orders for Jeddah to be frequently visited should remain in force, and orders will be given to all outward and homewards bound Vessels of War to call there, so that the flag may be frequently shewn, but during the hottest months.'¹²¹

It is noteworthy that beginning in the early 1880s, commanders on the station began complaining to the Admiralty about the frequent use of ships on political missions, arguing that this was undermining the navy's campaign against the slave trade. In particular, commanders contended that the Resident at Aden was using ships excessively to carry out political operations, resulting in an increase in slave traffic. As one captain wrote, 'so I think it will be seen that as long as the Red Sea

¹¹⁷ Armand Powlett, Captain Powlett to the Commander-in-Chief East Indies, 28 January 1878, Memo on the Slave Trade. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 4. (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 283.

¹¹⁸ John Corbett, Commander-in-Chief East Indies, 21 May 1878, Relative to the suggested employment of one of HM Ships at Aden to take the place of the Indian Government Steamer. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 4. (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 303.

¹¹⁹ Maxwell Heron, Commander Heron to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, 31 July 1879, Reporting Proceedings. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960* vol. 4 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 449.

¹²⁰ Robert Hall, Naval Secretary of the Admiralty to Rear Admiral W. Gore Jones, 9 April 1880, Report on the Slave Trade. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960*, vol. 4 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 576.

¹²¹ Ibid.

division is numerically weak, and that if they are to be at the call of the Political Resident [at Aden], nothing of any material consequence can ever be done for the suppression of the Slave Trade.¹²² To rectify this situation, he suggested that no less than five ships should be deployed to the Red Sea on a regular basis which should have 'nothing at all to do with the Political Resident, or the constant applications of the Consul at Jeddah'.¹²³ Ships might even, if travelling against the prevailing winds, cruise the sea through the blisteringly hot summer.¹²⁴

This note is significant because it indicates that local naval commanders felt the anti-slave trade campaign was being undermined by the strategic and political considerations of imperial officials. Indeed, the proposal to deploy five ships to the Red Sea independent of the Resident's authority was forwarded by the commander-in-chief to the Admiralty in one of his periodic reports.¹²⁵ It also suggests that as the political situation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden deteriorated in the 1880s, as will be discussed in Chapter IV, officials were increasingly forced to rely on the navy to uphold Britain's interests rather than through indirect diplomacy.

In fact, by November 1883 all anti-slave patrols in the Red Sea had been discontinued,¹²⁶ even though the Foreign Office had been informed that slave traffic was actually increasing due to a sharp drop in prices.¹²⁷ As the Royal Navy's campaign against the slave trade in the region was wound down, the ships previously used for interdiction were now used as a means of upholding British paramountcy by securing ports and 'showing the flag.' Ports which had hitherto been

¹²² Mather Byles, Commander Byles to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, 1 January 1881, letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 5 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 162.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

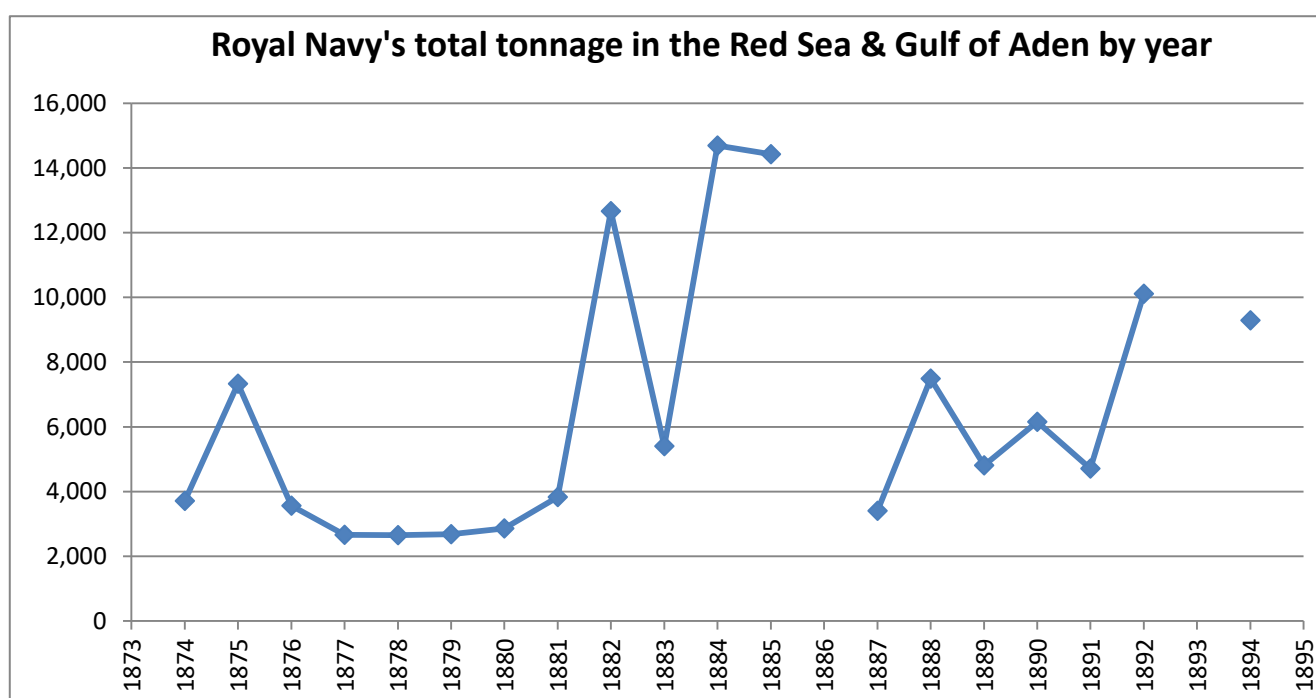
¹²⁵ W. Gore Jones, Rear-Admiral Jones to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 10 October 1881, Annual Report on the Slave Trade in the Red Sea. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 5 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 174.

¹²⁶ Antony Preston and John Major, *Send a Gunboat!: A study of the Gunboat and its role in British policy, 1854-1904* (London: Longmans, 1967), 131.

¹²⁷ Jas Zobrah, British Consul to Lord Granville, 9 December 1880, letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports 1820-1960*, vol. 4 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 583.

monitored as slave trading hubs were now viewed as potential naval stations, with officials warning that they would soon be used by hostile powers as bases to challenge British naval supremacy.¹²⁸

Preston and Major concluded that ‘however vague and uncoordinated British colonial policy may have been in the 1860s and 1870s the extensive naval activity during that period laid firm foundations for the subsequent British Empire in East Africa which took shape during the celebrated “Scramble”’.¹²⁹ It is true that anti-slavery operations established a permanent British naval presence in the Red Sea; the following graph displays the total tonnage of Royal Navy vessels assigned to patrols in the area during the period:¹³⁰



Once regular patrols of the sea were instituted in the early 1870s, the total resources assigned by the navy never dipped below 2,000 tons. It is interesting to note that the total tonnage began to increase beginning in 1881 as Egypt’s political situation deteriorated. The dramatic spike in

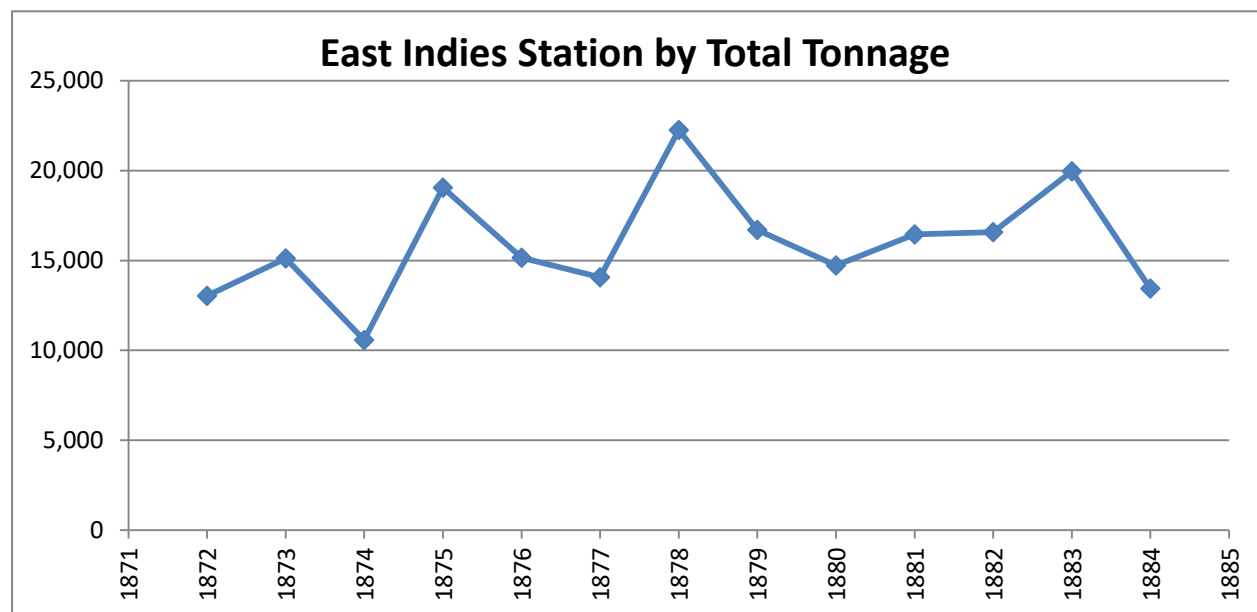
¹²⁸ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Confidential Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty and the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea; including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui.

¹²⁹ Preston and Major, *Send a Gunboat!*, 131.

¹³⁰ Figures taken from annual letters of proceedings from Commander-in-Chief East Indies to Secretary to the Admiralty in Anita Burdett, *The Persian & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vols. 3-6 (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993).

1882 may be attributed partly to the British Army's intervention in Egypt which was landed by ship at Suez. Similarly, the spike in 1884 is also likely to be due in part to the British intervention at the Sudanese port of Suakin in 1884.

The following chart, moreover, suggests that the increases in Royal Navy tonnage in the Red Sea were the result of more ships being sent there, and not because of a general increase in size of the East Indies Squadron generally:¹³¹



commander-in-chief of the station specifically to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden rather than by the Admiralty to the East Indies Squadron more generally. Indeed, the data indicates that in 1882 and 1884 a substantial portion of the squadron was deployed in the Red Sea, despite being responsible for the entire Indian Ocean.

It is also important to examine the types of vessels which were employed in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden over the course of this period. The classes initially assigned to the Red Sea during the 1860s and 1870s were typically small, fast gunboats suitable for long-range cruising and bursts of speed needed to catch sailing dhows. These included the *Plover*, *Amazon*, and *Arab* classes, all of

¹³¹ Figures taken from annual letters of proceedings from Commander-in-Chief East Indies to Secretary to the Admiralty in Anita Burdett, *The Persian & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vols. 3-6 (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993).

which were lightly armed with four guns or less.¹³² They were clearly intended to be utilised for peace-time missions such as surveying, law enforcement and scouting – the types of operations which were the hallmarks of indirect power.

By contrast, the vessels assigned to the Red Sea in the 1880s included heavier cruisers and blue-water vessels usually employed on more traditional maritime control operations such as trade protection and commerce raiding. Classes deployed to the Red Sea after 1881 included the *Osprey*, *Eclipse*, *Briton*, and *Comus*-class, all of which carried at least six guns, most more than 10.¹³³ Compared with their predecessors in the 1860s and 1870s, the vessels which cruised the Red Sea in the 1880s were more heavily armoured and carried larger-calibre guns. Although they continued to carry out imperial policing duties such as showing the flag in key ports and conducting scouting missions on behalf of imperial officials, the vessels of the 1880s had been designed and built to counter French and Russian commerce raiders.¹³⁴

Preston and Major correctly observed that there was considerable naval activity off the East African coast, in part due to the mid-Victorian moral crusade against the slave trade. But nevertheless, there is a sharp distinction between the number and type of vessels employed in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the 1860s and 1870s as opposed to the more politically volatile 1880s. Furthermore, whilst historians such as Richard D. Wolff attribute the navy's anti-slave trade missions with the expansion of the British Empire into northeastern Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, it is not at all clear that the navy imposed British rule over African territory. In fact, the letters sent between local commanders, the commander-in-chief, and the Admiralty suggest that captains deployed to the region regarded the frequent requests from the Resident at Aden for political missions to be a hindrance to their primary strategic objective.

¹³² David Lyon and Rif Winfield, *The Sail and Steam Navy List: All the Ships of the Royal Navy, 1815-1889* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 2003), 295.

¹³³ Bernard Ireland, *The World Encyclopaedia of Cruisers* (London: Anness Publishing, 2008), 65.

¹³⁴ Commander Gerard H.U. Noel, RN 'The Naval Prize Essay, 1876: On the Best Types of War-Vessels for the British Navy,' *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 20 (1877), 265.

The navy's interdiction of slave ships in the Red Sea must be considered as an example of maritime policing, the type of operation carried out by powerful navies in peacetime. The navy's campaign against the slave trade 'continuously demonstrated' Britain's oceanic hegemony in the Indian Ocean.¹³⁵ But to draw a connection between the navy's campaign against the slave trade and the extension of British imperial control over territory surrounding the Red Sea would be to overlook the strategic considerations of the 1880s which directly led to the annexation of territory. Indeed, it was the shift in British priorities which led to the decision to cancel anti-slave trade patrols in 1883. In the case of the Red Sea, the foundation for the expansion of the Empire into northeastern Africa was laid as a result of Britain's increasing dependence on the Suez route to link the Empire together. When that route appeared to come under threat in the 1880s, Britain abandoned its earlier efforts against the slave trade and instead concentrated on securing its naval hegemony along the Suez route.

Perim & Socotra

This chapter will now turn to the two examples of British territorial expansion which occurred in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the period before the 1880s. The two islands of Perim and Socotra were occupied and eventually annexed by the British once it became clear that they could both be seized by other powers and transformed into commanding naval bases along the Suez route. In both cases, British officials were reluctant to claim formal jurisdiction over the islands, until they were informed that the French or the Italians were planning on seizing them. Perim and Socotra were added to the British Empire to guarantee the future security of the Suez route. The case of both islands therefore usefully illustrates the phenomenon which would later drive British

¹³⁵ G.N. Sanderson, 'The European Partition of Africa: Coincidence or Conjuncture?', in E. F. Penrose, *European Imperialism and the Partition of Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1975), 18.

imperial expansion elsewhere in northeastern Africa, that of aggressive, pre-emptive imperialism to shore up the *status quo* against foreign incursions.

Since the departure of John Murray and the East India Company's troops in 1799, Perim had sat unoccupied in the middle of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Without fresh water, the island was not thought to be able to support a full garrison and with the departure of French troops from Egypt it receded from the minds of Britain's strategists. But after Ferdinand de Lesseps unveiled plans for his proposed Suez Canal in December 1856, Perim was once again viewed as the potential gateway to the new route to the East. Any nation which controlled both the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait would dominate both entrances to the sea and would be able to open and close the Suez route at will. With efforts already underway to connect Britain to India by steamship and by telegraph cable through the Red Sea, the British could not afford to let France establish so powerful a position in the Red Sea.

A naval legend held that in January 1857 a French frigate en route to claim Perim in preparation for the opening of the canal briefly stopped at Aden the night before she was due to make for the island. Over dinner with the Royal Navy officers and the British Resident, the expedition's French commander let slip the object of his mission. Thinking quickly, the British officers continued to ply their guests with wine whilst orders were secretly sent for a ship to set sail for Perim immediately. The following morning, the French awoke to discover that a few hours earlier the Royal Navy had claimed Perim for the Crown.

Unfortunately, the legend appears to be more fiction than fact. The operation to take Perim had been planned at the highest levels since at least December 1856 when de Lesseps revealed the plans for his proposed Suez Canal. Acting on orders from London, the government of Bombay instructed the Resident at Aden, Brigadier W. Coghlan, to prepare a force of engineers and sepoys to

be landed at Perim.¹³⁶ The British government insisted that the occupation of Perim was simply a necessary measure for the purpose of constructing a lighthouse, although it is true that Coghlan was ordered to take possession of the island before the French could arrive.

Despite the government's publicly stated intentions, the orders sent between the Bombay government and Aden make it clear that this move was meant to present the French with a *fait accompli*. As the Resident assured his superiors in Bombay, 'the utmost secrecy shall be observed and no time shall be lost in preparing the people and the material for the undertaking, so that the party may be despatched as soon as the [steamboat] returns and is again ready for Sea.'¹³⁷ In January 1857 when everything had been prepared, the government sent word to Aden to the Resident to embark immediately for Perim, stating that it was the 'Resolution of Government that under the Secret Committee's letter of November 10th, Brigadier Coghlan shall be directed to take possession of the Island quietly.'¹³⁸ In order to ensure that the occupation of the island was permanent, the Bombay government also agreed to pay for the shipment of a condenser to Perim to provide a fresh water supply for the garrison of sepoys and engineers.¹³⁹

In order to support the official narrative being broadcast by London, the commander of the expedition was also instructed that 'no time may be lost in displaying a light on Perim, so that the ostensible object of the British Government may form a prominent feature in Lieutenant Grey's proceedings.'¹⁴⁰ However, as soon as Coghlan landed and reoccupied the island, he immediately informed his superiors that he had surveyed a site for both a lighthouse and a fort. As he wrote to

¹³⁶ British Library, India Office Records, IOR/R/20/E/53, Letter from W.M. Coghlan to H.L. Anderson, Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 29 December 1856.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ British Library, India Office Records, Mss Eur F231/30, Summaries of official secret despatches from India and Persia relating to Herat, Island of Perim, China, Aden, Punjab, Persia, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sind, Socotra and Baghdad; including details of the Persian expedition, Dost Muhammad, Letter from the Secretary to the Bombay Government to Brigadier W. Coghlan, 16 January 1857.

¹³⁹ British Library, India Office Records, Mss Eur F231/30, Summaries of official secret despatches from India and Persia, Dost Muhammad, Secret letter from the Governor-General in Council to Brigadier W. Coghlan, 16 January 1857.

¹⁴⁰ British Library, India Office Records, Mss Eur F231/30, Summaries of official secret despatches from India and Persia, Dost Muhammad, Secret letter relating to Perim, 16 January 1857.

Bombay, 'the armament, to be of any use at all, should be heavy so that the Harbour may be thoroughly commanded – the 56 Pounder appears to me a Piece well suited to the purpose as possessing great power, being easy to handle, and carrying a Red Hot Shot.'¹⁴¹ He further advised that, 'with respect to the Garrison, though, ordinarily, from thirty to forty men may suffice.'¹⁴²

Significantly, the Indian authorities did not object to Coghlan's proposal to build a redoubt on Perim, although they did question his suggestion to construct the lighthouse within it.¹⁴³ After more consideration, the idea of constructing a redoubt on Perim was ultimately vetoed by London over continued concerns about the freshwater supply and the realisation that even the heaviest artillery would not have sufficient range to close the entire Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. What is more, whilst the lighthouse on Perim was completed in 1861,¹⁴⁴ the government abandoned the idea of charging light tolls on ships passing through the strait.¹⁴⁵ 'The Governor in Council is of the opinion with reference to the great jealousy exhibited by foreign powers in connection with the re-occupation of Perim by the British Government, and to the difficulties of detail which will arise in the realisation of the toll, that no impost of the kind should be attempted,' read the orders submitted by Bombay to the Resident at Aden.¹⁴⁶ Instead, 'it should be shewn to the world that the British Government has in the interests of commerce, erected a Light House at Perim for the benefit of all nations.'¹⁴⁷

Despite its limited military value, however, Perim would remain a British possession until 1967. In 1875, the government briefly considered handing the island over to Egypt provided that

¹⁴¹ British Library, India Office Records, R/20/A/495, Letter from Brigadier W. Coghlan to Lieutenant Wilkins, 6 May 1858.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ British Library, India Office Records, R/20/A/495, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of Bombay to Colonel W Scott, Acting Chief Engineer of Public Works, 5 November 1858.

¹⁴⁴ British Library, India Office Records, R/20/A/495, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of Bombay to Colonel W Scott, Chief Engineer at the Presidency, 26 December 1859.

¹⁴⁵ British Library, India Office Records, R/20/A/495, Letter from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bombay to Captain R. L. Playfair, 24 November 1860.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

certain guarantees were made regarding the security of the strait.¹⁴⁸ When these guarantees were refused, the British withdrew their offer. After despatching engineers to inspect the island in the 1880s, the War Office would conclude that although useless on its own, “[Perim] is doubtless necessary to hold in order to prevent any other power taking it and converting it into a fortress.”¹⁴⁹ This was an especially significant comment because it indicated that territory in the region was only valuable in so far that it was strategically important. Barren and waterless, Perim was taken solely so that it would not be captured by any other maritime power, an attitude which would be extended to other territories in the region as well.

The second island taken by the British during this period was Socotra, the largest of an archipelago of islands for centuries under the control of a series of Yemeni sultans. As previously discussed, the island was originally surveyed in 1834 as a possible site for a coaling station for steamers operating between Suez and Bombay, ‘it being the wish of the Government to obtain all possible information regarding the Island, not only as to its correct geographical position and Harbours but its Government, population, produce, fertility and quality of soil, as well as the Religion, Customs, Manners, power and wealth of its Inhabitants.’¹⁵⁰

Even at this early stage, the resulting report concluded that ‘when we consider the position of Socotra, its lying directly in the route of the Trade from India by the way of the Red Sea (the entrance to which it may be said to command) on the one hand, and close to the Track of our ships by the way of the Cape on the other, a position the advantage of which under an enterprising population and enlightened Government could scarcely have failed at some period to have brought it into great commercial notice and prosperity.’¹⁵¹ In 1844, Captain Haines, then serving as Governor

¹⁴⁸ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Letter from the Foreign Office to General Stanton, May 1875.

¹⁴⁹ Earl of Kimberley, Secretary of State for India to the Governor-General of India, 18 March 1886, Letter. In Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 6 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 55.

¹⁵⁰ British Library, India Office Records, Board’s Collections vol. 1504, IOR/F/4/1504, Reports on the island of Socotra, 3 June 1834.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

of Aden, was ordered to proceed to Socotra in order to reassess the island's suitability as a potential coaling station, and, if so, to purchase sovereignty of the island from the native ruler.¹⁵² However, soon after arriving Haines confirmed that Socotra offered only limited opportunities as a commercial coaling station, and interest in the island faded accordingly for the next several decades.¹⁵³

Following the opening of the Suez Canal, attention was once again drawn to Socotra's strategic position on the new shipping route. In early 1875, the Italians expressed an interest in possibly purchasing Socotra from the local sultan, raising concerns in India that this would compromise the security of the line of communication back to Britain. 'It would in our opinion,' wrote the Indian government to the Secretary of State Lord Salisbury, it would 'be decidedly averse to British interests were any European Power to establish itself on an island which lies so immediately on the direct line of communication to the east via the Suez Canal.'¹⁵⁴ Salisbury agreed, although he was reluctant to assume full political control over the island. In his reply to the Governor-General he stated,

I am of opinion, however, after consultations with H.M.'s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs that although having regard to the consideration adverted to in your letter of the 29th January last, to the Government of Bombay it may be unadvisable to acquire absolute possession of the island, yet that its occupation by a foreign power might be inconvenient or even dangerous, and that if immunity from that contingency can be secured by a moderate payment to the Sultan of Kisheen, it is desirable that the arrangement suggested by the Resident in Aden should be effected. I request therefore that the Officer may be instructed to take the necessary steps in the matter at an early date.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² L.S. Dawson, *Memoirs of Hydrography: Brief Biographies of the Principal Officers who have Served in HM Naval Surveying Service* (Eastbourne: Henry W. Keay, 1885), 40.

¹⁵³ British Library, India Office Records, R/20/A/495, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary to the Government of Bombay Political Department, 29 January 1875.

¹⁵⁴ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Letter from the Government of India Foreign Department to Lord Salisbury, 29 January 1875.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from Lord Salisbury to the Governor-General in Council, 23 April 1875, in British Library, London, IOR R/20/A/495, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Political Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 9 June 1875.

As it was not entirely clear who owned the island, the Indian government instructed the Resident at Aden, Brigadier-General John Schneider, to ascertain whether it belonged to the local sultan alone, or if he was subject to a suzerain on the mainland.¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, this information proved impossible to obtain due to the complicated nature of Yemeni tribal politics, and Schneider took matters into his own hands by deciding that the government would recognise the sultan as the sole ruler of the island.¹⁵⁷ In November 1875 Schneider submitted a draft proposal to the Indian government for approval which read: 'Sultan Isa bin Hamad bin Afreen does pledge and binds himself his heirs and successors by the agreement never to cede, sell, mortgage or give for occupation save to the British Government the Island of Socotra and the neighbouring Islands.'¹⁵⁸ Evidently the text was approved by the Cabinet in London, because in January 1876 the Foreign Secretary wired Schneider directly with orders to 'conclude arrangement about Socotra without delay. Increase the money payment if necessary.'¹⁵⁹ The agreement was signed shortly thereafter, formally placing Socotra under the protection of the British Crown.

Speaking eight years later in the House of Commons, Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, the Foreign Office's under-secretary of state, specifically cited the case of Socotra to justify the ongoing 1884 British military intervention in the Eastern Sudan. To support the government's decision to annex the Sudanese port of Suakin, Fitzmaurice argued,

'Lord Salisbury, when Secretary of State for India, had also, with great sagacity, made a Treaty in regard to the Island of Socotra which prevented any other Foreign Power acquiring it. The possession of those islands was a proof that they desired that the possession of the

¹⁵⁶ British Library, London, IOR R/20/A/495, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Political Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 9 June 1875.

¹⁵⁷ British Library, London, India Office Records, IOR R/20/A/495, Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel S.B. Miles to Brigadier-General Schneider, 2 October 1875.

¹⁵⁸ British Library, London, India Office Records, IOR R/20/A/495, Letter from Brigadier-General John Schneider to the Chief Secretary to the Government of India, 23 November 1875.

¹⁵⁹ British Library, London, India Office Records, IOR R/20/A/495, Service Telegram from the Foreign Secretary to the Resident in Aden, 13 January 1876.

land and territory in the neighbourhood of the Red Sea, and especially about its mouth, should be a matter in regard to which this country should have a voice.’¹⁶⁰

As with Perim, the case of Socotra demonstrated how foreign overtures about previously overlooked territories could suddenly reignite British interest. Perim and Socotra, once regarded as barren rocks unsuited for military garrisons, were secured as soon as either the French or the Italians expressed interest in acquiring them. Indeed, the acquisition of Perim was even later termed by Fitzmaurice as a ‘bright ornament in the history of British naval enterprize.’¹⁶¹ This would prove to be the hallmark of British imperialism in the Red Sea region as a whole, where territory was taken only once there was a risk it could be seized by a rival power.

Interestingly, the case of Lahej proves that the inverse was true as well. In June 1870, W. Wedderburn, the Acting Resident at Aden submitted a memorandum to the Bombay government containing his assessment of British paramountcy along the Suez route. Wedderburn began by noting that ‘there is no doubt that the opening of the Suez Canal must have a most important political influence on the countries bordering on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Arabia...and the Government should consider to what extent British interests are likely to be affected by the presence and competition of other European nations along this route.’ Wedderburn warned that whilst British ‘Naval supremacy in these waters has been unquestioned...such a state of things cannot now be expected to continue. Every nation in Europe is hastening to claim a share. Where merchant men go ships-of-war must follow, and stations will be acquired on the coasts for coaling and stores.’ He suggested that the Lahej, a local sultanate stretching from the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to Aden, would be a prime stretch of territory, writing that it would be ‘unnecessary to enlarge upon the advantages which even the nominal sovereignty over this line of coast would confer.’¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² British Library, India Office Records, IOR/R/20/E/88, W. Wedderburn, Acting Political Secretary, Memorandum on the Red Sea Route, 5 July 1870

Wedderburn informed his superiors in Bombay that it was necessary to open negotiations to purchase Lahej from its sultan as soon as possible to prevent France or Italy from 'taking up positions manifestly antagonistic or injurious to British interests.'¹⁶³ The Bombay government agreed with Wedderburn, and forwarded his proposal on to the Governor-General along with a separate memorandum endorsing the plan to purchase Lahej. Because it was important to remain 'the paramount power along this seaboard,'¹⁶⁴ the Bombay government wanted to permit the Resident to buy the sultanate from its cash-strapped local ruler to ensure that this 'would prevent Foreign Powers taking up positions on the Arabian Coast.'¹⁶⁵

Despite Bombay's endorsement, however, the Indian government was not convinced that it was necessary to purchase Lahej. Whilst the Governor's Council agreed that the 'acquisition of [a Yemeni port] by another European Government may be undesirable',¹⁶⁶ it did not believe that there was an imminent threat of Lahej falling under the control of the French or the Italians.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, as the government secretary reminded Wedderburn, Aden was the only port along the Yemeni coastline capable of being used as a naval base.¹⁶⁸ Eager to avoid any political difficulties which might be inherited by acquiring Lahej, the Indian government forbade Wedderburn from pursuing any further negotiations related to purchasing the territory from its native ruler.¹⁶⁹

In other words, the British were only interested in securing territory in the Red Sea region if there was the distinct possibility that a rival European government would take it and thus somehow upset the regional balance of power, which was tilted in Britain's favour. As was discussed previously in Chapter II, there was considerable reluctance in Britain to spending public money on the Empire,

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ British Library, India Office Records, IOR/R/20/E/88, G.R. Goodfellow, Bombay Political Department, Memorandum Relating of the Aden Settlement, 23 October 1870.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ British Library, India Office Records, IOR/R/20/E/88, Letter from the Secretary to the Government to India to W. Wedderburn, 2 June 1871.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

especially in annexing stretches of unprofitable territory. The case of Lahej clearly underlines this reluctance.

Indeed, even when the potentially strategic outpost of Socotra was threatened with Italian occupation, the government was only willing to take the absolute minimum steps to secure the island. The treaty signed by Schneider and Sultan bin Afreen merely stipulated that the sultan agreed not to cede any part of his kingdom to a foreign government without British permission, leaving Socotra a protected but independent state. British and Indian officials clearly recognised the importance of being the paramount naval power along the Suez route, but were also determined to remain so in the most economical manner possible.

Egypt's African Empire and Indirect British Control

In its recommendation to the Governor-General regarding Lahej, the Bombay government observed that whilst Britain could take steps to secure the Arabian coast from rival European occupation, 'the African Coast is still open to them;...it is hopeless to expect to reserve the entire Red Sea coast by well selected Native Agents at the principal ports.'¹⁷⁰ The late 1860s and the 1870s proved to be a crucial period for British interests in the Red Sea region as the opening of the Suez Canal drew international attention to the waterway and maritime powers sought opportunities to establish footholds along the route. Unwilling to take on the burdens of imperial rule itself, Britain instead chose to recognise the claims put forward by the new and ambitious ruler of Egypt, the Khedive Ismail, to the entire coastline from Suez to Cape Guardafui at the tip of the Horn of Africa. Even if in reality Egypt was unable to exert political control over this vast swathe of territory or to back up its claims with military force, recognition of them was a useful way for Britain to deny key

¹⁷⁰ British Library, India Office Records, IOR/R/20/E/88, G.R. Goodfellow, Bombay Political Department, Memorandum Relating of the Aden Settlement, 23 October 1870.

ports to the French and Italians. Where Paris and Rome were able to obtain small footholds, the fictitious Egyptian empire could be used to contain them at no cost to Her Majesty's Treasury.

Before 1866, the question of who owned the African coast of the Red Sea was a difficult one. Since the sixteenth century the Ottomans had controlled the ports of Suakin and Massawa, but besides vague Ottoman claims to the Sudanese coastline, it was still very unclear who owned territory south of Massawa. Ethiopian claims to the Tigrinya shoreline of present-day Eritrea were constantly undermined by powerful local warlords and by frequent incursions by Ottoman and Egyptian troops, and hence were ignored by the European powers. Further to the south, the *de facto* independence of the tribes of Somaliland had been recognised by the British government since 1827.¹⁷¹

In 1866 the situation began to change when Ismail persuaded his overlord the Ottoman sultan Abdülaziz I to issue a firman handing over the two ancient ports of Suakin and Massawa to Egyptian rule, along with their 'annexed and dependent territories.'¹⁷² The borders of these dependent territories were left undefined. The following year, Ismail also managed to persuade Abdülaziz to transfer effective jurisdiction over the port of Zeyla on the Somali coast to Egypt as well, giving Cairo a claim to the Somali coastline.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Egyptian Claims to Sovereignty over the Somali Coast.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Robert Walter Canning Large, 'The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905', PhD Thesis, June 1974, SOAS University of London.



Figure 4: Extent of Egyptian colonial claims, 1880. Note the expansion of British claims around Aden in Arabia and Socotra's unoccupied status.

Hugh Webster and Arthur White, *Africa*, 1885. Scale not given, *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, vol. 1. 1885.
https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/africa_1885.jpg. (20 June 2018).

Recognising early on that de Lessep's canal would transform the Red Sea into a strategic waterway, Ismail was determined to establish Egyptian control over key sections of the new route to the East by seizing the principal ports between Suez and Aden.¹⁷⁴ In 1873, Egyptian troops occupied the Somali port of Berbera opposite Aden¹⁷⁵ and in 1875 the Khedive formally laid claim to the entire

¹⁷⁴ Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 141.

¹⁷⁵ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, Confidential Letter from the Assistant Secretary of the Political Secret Department to the Secretary to the Government of India Foreign Department, 14 August 1874.

Somali coastline.¹⁷⁶ Ismail even attempted to claim the Indian Ocean port of Kismayu in the far south of Somalia, infringing on the overlapping claim made by the Sultan of Zanzibar and drawing protests from the British government.¹⁷⁷ The Foreign Office was warned that 'Egypt and Turkey...are now actively extending their posts both on the Arabian and African Coasts. They are quite strong enough to push their way and occupy port after port on the coast.'¹⁷⁸ By 1875, the Egyptians had succeeded in establishing garrisons in every major port on the African coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and promulgated their claim to all the territory in between from Egypt proper to the Horn of Africa.¹⁷⁹

The initial British reaction was to diplomatically oppose the expansion of Egypt's territorial claims, particularly along the Somali coast upon which Aden depended for its food supply. Whilst the formerly Ottoman-controlled port of Zeyla was occupied by Egypt, the Somali port of Berbera remained open. As early as 1870 when the Egyptians first expressed an interest in acquiring Berbera as part of their new African empire, the Cabinet urged the Secretary of State for India, the Duke of Argyll, to 'remonstrat[e] against the proceedings of the Turkish or Egyptian officials, and the necessity of taking such steps as might seem most suitable to secure the independence of the Somali territory.'¹⁸⁰ But undeterred by British diplomatic pressure, the Egyptians proceeded to land troops in Berbera in 1873, prompting Schneider, the Resident at Aden, to warn that 'The injury that may follow to our position in Aden from the permanent occupation by the Turks or Egyptians of Berbera and other ports on the African coast outside the Red Sea have been so fully reported on by former Residents that I have nothing to add on the subject.'¹⁸¹ When Egypt did formally announce that it

¹⁷⁶ Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 141.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 142.

¹⁷⁸ National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Sir Bartle Frere, Memorandum on the Treaties with the Somalis and other Tribes on the African Coast of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

¹⁷⁹ Anthony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea: the History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 98.

¹⁸⁰ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41 : 1874-1896, Egyptian Claims to Sovereignty over the Somali Coast.

¹⁸¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

was annexing Berbera later in 1873, it had already stationed a detachment of troops in the town. The same year, Ismail also managed to secure a second firman from the sultan ratifying the transfer of Suakin and Massawa over to Egyptian rule.¹⁸²

In the aftermath of Egypt's occupation of Berbera, Lord Derby, the Foreign Secretary, requested information on the legal status of the Somali coast and the nature of Britain's relationship with the local tribes.¹⁸³ Similarly, Lord Salisbury, Argyll's successor at the India Office, commissioned an intelligence report on Berbera and an overview of the treaties previously signed with the Somali tribes.¹⁸⁴ The Indian government was especially concerned about Egyptian moves into Somaliland and demanded that the Foreign Office furnish it with information about the 'policy to be pursued with reference to the proceedings of the Turkish and Egyptian officials at Berbera, and in the neighbourhood of that port.'¹⁸⁵

Nevertheless, by 1875 it was clear that Egypt's control over the Somali coast was an accomplished fact, and Derby concluded 'there is now no practical question of repressing the extension of Egyptian power beyond the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb'.¹⁸⁶ With Egyptian garrisons stationed at every port on the African shore, the question now lay 'between regulating the existing state of things and leaving matters to take their course.'¹⁸⁷ The Indian government agreed to accept Egypt's *de facto* ownership of Somali coast, stating

it appears to us advisable that some amicable understanding should be come to with the Porte or the Khedive in regard to the commercial and other advantages which we wish to

¹⁸² British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui.

¹⁸³ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, Confidential Letter from the Political Resident Aden to Secretary to the Political Department Bombay, 23 December 1873

¹⁸⁴ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, Confidential Letter from the Assistant Secretary of the Political Secret Department to the Secretary to the Government of India Foreign Department, 14 August 1874.

¹⁸⁵ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Egyptian Claims to Sovereignty over the Somali Coast.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

preserve at Berbera and elsewhere, and that so long as these are maintained we should not oppose the extension of the Turkish or Egyptian power on the African coast. Indeed, if the establishment of other European Powers on the African coast of the Gulf of Aden be deemed disadvantageous to our interests, there would, in our opinion, be less likelihood of such powers obtaining a footing on those coasts were the country consolidated under the Egyptian rule, than while it remains parcelled out among a number of barbarous tribes.¹⁸⁸

Salisbury concurred, writing to Derby that 'The possible establishment of other European powers on the African coast of the Gulf of Aden is a contingency which should be borne in mind...Such an event would, under present circumstances, be most detrimental to our interests, and would doubtless be less likely to occur were the country consolidated under Egyptian rule.'¹⁸⁹ With the Foreign and India offices prepared to accept Egyptian ownership of Somaliland, the government agreed to recognise Egypt's claims in early 1875.¹⁹⁰

The decision to recognise Egyptian claims south of Massawa was also made in reaction to attempts by France and Italy to make gains into northeastern Africa. The French, frustrated in their attempt to take Perim, had by the late 1850s begun scouting along African coastline for a port near the southern entrance to the Red Sea which could be turned into a naval station. In June 1862, after completing a survey of the coastline, they purchased a small fishing village just outside the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in the name of the Emperor Napoleon III.¹⁹¹ The timing of the purchase was not coincidental. The French conquest of Cochinchina (1858-1862) had been hampered by Britain's refusal to allow French ships to recoal at Aden, ostensibly on the grounds of neutrality. By establishing a naval coaling station in Obokh, the French hoped to secure a refuelling point to allow its troopships to travel from Marseilles to Indochina without undertaking the lengthy voyage around

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui.

the Cape.¹⁹² Moreover, France followed this up in 1869 by attempting to purchase a mainland anchorage at Shaikh Said on the Arabian side of the Bab-el-Mandeb in order to establish a grip over the strait.¹⁹³ Although the move was quickly rebuffed by Ottoman troops, there was a noted uptick in the number of French naval deployments to Obokh following the Suez Canal's opening in 1869.¹⁹⁴

The potential threat posed by the French at Obokh was taken seriously by the Carnarvon Commission, which noted in its final 1882 report that the French had indeed begun stockpiling coal in a depot at the port. The Commission declared that 'the importance of Obock is...particularly on account of this advantage, and as a connecting link between France and her Colonies in Asia, as Aden is between England and India.'¹⁹⁵ Hence, from its very outset Obokh was recognised as a naval facility, and the French presence viewed as a challenge to Aden's status as the only coaling station between Egypt and the East and an therefore an obvious target for the Royal Navy.

In addition to the French, the Italians also eagerly sought out opportunities to stake a claim to a port or harbour on the African coast. Shortly after the canal opened, the Rubattino Shipping Company purchased a harbour in Assab Bay inside the Red Sea just north of Bab-el-Mandeb from a local chieftain for the purpose of building a supply depot for a planned shipping line from Italy to the Orient.¹⁹⁶ The Italian ambassador in London insisted publicly that the move was simply a commercial one between a private company and a local government official and was 'not a government enterprise.'¹⁹⁷ An 1871 despatch from Visconti Venosta, the Foreign Minister, though, made it perfectly clear that the Italian government privately felt that 'though Signor Rubattino had become

¹⁹² *The Somali Peninsula: A New Light on Imperial Motives* (Information Service of the Somali Government, 1962), 21.

¹⁹³ Large, 'The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905', 3.4.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.3.

¹⁹⁵ National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/3, Cabinet Office Records, Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad, Second Report, 1882.

¹⁹⁶ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41 : 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui.

¹⁹⁷ Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone, U1590/O237, Correspondence relating to the Italian Occupation of Assab Bay, 14 May 1880.

the private proprietor of the territory of Assab, the Royal Government had become its Sovereign.¹⁹⁸ In fact, later that year the government even announced plans for founding a penal colony in Assab in addition to the construction of a small dockyard and coaling depot.¹⁹⁹ An officer of the Regia Marina was sent to report back on the harbour's suitability for use as a naval station.²⁰⁰

The British government was under no illusions about the nature of the settlement at Assab Bay. Studied at length by the Carnarvon Commission, the committee compiled evidence that the purchase of Assab was no mere commercial transaction made by private parties. In its 1882 report, the Commission noted that Assab was 'the only Colony possessed by the Italians, and, though nominally owned by the Rubattino Company, is to all intents and purposes a Government Settlement.'²⁰¹

The government's decision to recognise Egypt's claims was therefore both a reflection of the reality on the ground as well as a choice between the lesser of two evils. Better that the weak and malleable Egyptians should control the African coasts rather than let the French and Italians expand their territorial holdings from the small footholds they had managed to obtain. This became all the more important once the government purchased the majority of the canal shares from the Khedive in 1875. When, for example, the government was asked in the House to clarify what sections of the coast it recognised Egyptian jurisdiction, Robert Bourke, the Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, replied that "No treaty or other official document exists at the Foreign office in which any particularly limit of the territory is placed under the rule of the Khedive has been defined or recognised by this country."²⁰² This vague answer effectively allowed the government to decide

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ National Archives, Kew, CAB 7/3, Cabinet Office Records, Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad, Second Report, 1882.

²⁰² Robert Bourke, Speech to the House of Commons, 24 July 1876, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. 230 (1876), 1810.

whenever it was convenient to head off possible French and Italian moves by declaring territory to be Egyptian.

The government formalised this arrangement by persuading Ismail to sign the 1877 Anglo-Egyptian Slave Convention, outlawing the slave trade in all of Egypt's dominions, including central Africa. The Khedive also agreed to exclusively permit Royal Navy ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to detain and board any Egyptian-flagged vessels suspected of carrying slaves, effectively granting Britain a legal monopoly in the waterway.²⁰³ Finally, in return for a public recognition of Egypt's territorial claims along the full length of the African coast to Cape Guardafui, the Khedive agreed 'that no portion of the territory, to be thus incorporated fully with Egypt under his hereditary rule, shall ever be ceded to any foreign Power.'²⁰⁴

The treaty had been pushed heavily by the Foreign Office and in particular by Lord Tenterden, the permanent under-secretary.²⁰⁵ As Eve M. Troutt Powell, a historian of the Ottoman Middle East and of African slavery, noted in her analysis of British imperialism in Sudan, both the department and Parliament were under pressure from the 'aggressive' British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.²⁰⁶ The society was influential, even to the point of petitioning the Khedive Ismail directly, and it claimed to represent the majority of British public opinion.²⁰⁷ However, Britain insisted on signing a bilateral agreement with Ismail in order to consolidate its control over the Egyptian government and the all-important Suez Canal. When Ismail was embroiled in a serious debt crisis, Tenterden argued that the British government should use its financial leverage to force him into signing a bilateral treaty, deliberately excluding the French. As he explained to his superiors, 'we

²⁰³ British Library, India Office Records, CM/IOR/026, Anglo-Egyptian Slave Trade Convention, 4 August 1877.

²⁰⁴ British Library, India Office Records, CM/IOR/026, Agreement between Her Majesty and His Highness the Khedive Respecting Jurisdiction over the Somali Coast, 7 September 1877.

²⁰⁵ T.G. Otte, 'A Case of Unceasing Remonstrance,' in Keith Hamilton and Patrick Salmon, ed., *Slavery Diplomacy and Empire: Britain and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807-1975* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 109.

²⁰⁶ Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 140.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

particularly want to keep the French & others from interfering with the Egyptians or the approaches to the Red Sea.²⁰⁸

Whilst the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society could put pressure on politicians in Whitehall to take action against the slave trade in the Red Sea, the actual treaty was shaped by men like Tenterden to reflect Britain's imperial interests as well. Tenterden himself had risen from the rank of a clerk in the Foreign Office to permanent under-secretary due to his extensive work on the *Alabama* commission between Britain and the United States following the Civil War.²⁰⁹ He served as a secretary to the high commission held in Washington in 1871, and then acted as the British agent at the general arbitration the following year.²¹⁰ In 1873, Lord Derby appointed him to be permanent under-secretary.²¹¹ Tenterden had every reason to be aware of the vulnerability of British shipping and communications to marauding cruisers like the *Alabama*, and it is unsurprising that he advocated an assertive policy with Egypt in regards to the control over the Suez Canal approaches.

Beyond simply empowering Royal Navy ships to stop and search Egyptian-flagged vessels, the treaty effectively allowed Britain to use Egypt as a 'cat's paw' to control the Somali coast on its behalf and to stop any rival maritime power from establishing itself along the Suez line.²¹² The Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II refused to countersign the treaty, a technicality which did not prevent the abolition of slavery in the Egyptian Sudan or the Royal Navy from intercepting slave traders in the Red Sea.²¹³ The Anglo-Egyptian convention was important in that it illustrated Britain's use of indirect control over the Red Sea coastline through its Egyptian proxy for the purpose of blocking France and Italy from the region's most important ports. Confined to the small and shallow harbours

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Otte, 'A Case of Unceasing Remonstrance,' 109.

²⁰⁹ R. A. Jones, 'Abbott, Charles Stuart Aubrey, third Baron Tenterden (1834–1882)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13, accessed 16 Aug 2016].

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Sanderson, 'The European Partition of Africa: Coincidence or Conjuncture?', 22.

²¹³ Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone, U1590/O237, Stanhope of Chevening Manuscripts, Correspondence relating to the Italian Occupation of Assab Bay, 14 May 1880.

in Assab and Obokh, Britain's European rivals would never be able to challenge the naval power headquartered in Aden.

The French were marooned in their small settlement at Obokh, locked in between Egyptian territorial claims to the north and south. The Italians, however, occupied a legal grey area, a section of coast claimed by both Egypt and Ethiopia but which was in reality controlled by neither. In 1875, competition between the two African powers for hegemony over northeastern Africa had descended into war, more about which will be discussed in Chapter IV. The ensuing conflict and stalemate between Egypt and Ethiopia meant that by 1879 the area surrounding Assab Bay was effectively no-man's land, offering the Italians the opportunity to begin developing a town and a port on the land originally purchased by the Rubattino company.

In the summer of that year, HMS *Lynx*, a gunboat normally assigned to anti-slavery patrols, reported to the Aden Resident that a large number of Italian warships had been sighted outside of Assab.²¹⁴ As her captain had discovered, one of these vessels, the frigate *Rapido*, carried an expedition from the Italian Geographical Society which would be carrying out a survey in the hinterlands outside of Assab.²¹⁵ The Indian government soon grew concerned that the Italians were attempting to expand their holdings around Assab, or possibly scouting for a deeper port along the coastline for a second settlement.²¹⁶ Ships in the area were ordered to observe and report on activity in Assab, where construction work on a series of docks and buildings had been started. Returning from one of these cruises in December 1879, the captain of HMS *Philomel* confirmed that the Italians were actively developing a port and were building a barracks for troops. As the captain wrote to the Aden Resident, 'the place has become an Italian colony, which can at any time be used for warlike purposes, or fortified.'²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

As soon as word reached London about Italian moves in Assab, Salisbury contacted Sir Edward Malet, the British Consul in Cairo, instructing him to block the Italians by persuading the Egyptian government to hoist the Ottoman flag at Assab to reassert the Porte's authority.²¹⁸ The Egyptians though were reluctant to plant a flag in Assab because, as the Foreign Minister explained to Malet, this would give the appearance that Egypt was taking possession of the port and would undermine Egypt's existing claim to the entire African coastline.²¹⁹ Malet also pointed out that although 'Egyptian authority along the coast had become generally established...there may have been isolated points, such as Assab Bay, where it was not effectively asserted.'²²⁰ In other words, despite British efforts to insulate the African coast of the Red Sea using Egypt's territorial claims, Italy had managed to discover a chink in the armour.

The Italians, upon hearing of Salisbury's efforts to thwart their project, were quick to inform the Foreign Office that they did not recognise Egypt's claim, and that the settlement was merely a commercial coaling depot and not 'a military establishment.'²²¹ Unconvinced, government became even more alarmed when in March it learned that the Italians were also attempting to purchase some of the islands in Assab Bay from a local chieftain claiming to be sultan of the area. Lord Cranbrook, the Secretary of State for India who had previously carried out Cardwell's army reforms whilst serving as his successor at the War Office and had recently overseen the Second Afghan War,²²² was adamantly opposed to letting the Italians seize the islands in the bay. 'It appears to Lord Cranbrook,' he wrote to the Foreign Office, 'that an absolute purchase of the islands would not, under any circumstances, be expedient...[it is] inconsistent with the arguments used in Lord

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Jonathan Parry, 'Hardy, Gathorne Gathorne-, first earl of Cranbrook (1814–1906)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33356>, accessed 5 Jan 2017].

Salisbury's Despatch...upholding the sovereignty of Egypt over Assab Bay.'²²³ Salisbury agreed, and suggested that the Resident at Aden should negotiate a treaty with the local sultan 'similar in its character to that which was made with the Sultan of Socotra in January 1876,' to prevent the sale of the islands to Italy.

In response to these attempts to stifle the development of their new settlement at Assab, the Italians embarked on a campaign to persuade the British to sanction the colony. Rome understood exactly why Britain was so reluctant to permit European powers from establishing or seizing ports in the Red Sea, and they were eager to assure London that Italian control over Assab would in no way threaten the Suez route. In the summer of 1881, the British ambassador reported to the Foreign Office that 'the Italian Government said it would be ready to agree to any conditions which Her Majesty's Government might consider necessary as a security against the Italian colony ever becoming a source of menace to the communications with India, or an embarrassment in any way to English interests.'²²⁴ The Italians also realised that Britain was in a weak bargaining position. With a detachment of Italian troops stationed in a newly-constructed fort at Assab and the Khedive's control over the coastline rapidly eroding as the war with Ethiopia turned against Egypt, Italy was in *de facto* control of Assab Bay. By 1879 the Ethiopians had effectively destroyed Egyptian military power on the Eritrean seaboard, but they lacked the military strength to take the fortified coastal settlements.²²⁵ With the prospect of a political vacuum developing along the African coast, it served

²²³ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui, letter from Lord Cranbrook to the Foreign Office, 11 March 1880.

²²⁴ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41: 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui, letter from Sir A. Pagent to the Foreign Office, 30 June 1881.

²²⁵ d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, 99.

Britain's interests better to have a relatively weaker and friendlier European government controlling the harbour rather than the French or the Ethiopians.

Unable to dislodge the Italians diplomatically and aware of the imminent collapse of Egyptian control over the coast, the British government relented and in September 1881 agreed to recognise Italy's claim over Assab. Salisbury telegraphed the ambassador in Rome,

Inform the Italian Government that, if they are willing to enter into a formal convention with Egypt, which shall confirm their purchases of territory at Assab, on the condition that, in accordance with their previous assurances, the Settlement shall be purely commercial, and shall not be fortified or used as a military or naval station, Her Majesty's Government will sound the Egyptian Government and the Porte as to their willingness to accept the proposal, and will support it.²²⁶

This decision underlines Britain's strategy of making *ad-hoc* arrangements to maintain indirect control over the African littoral of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Reluctant to take on the political and financial responsibilities of governing territory, the British hoped to construct buffer states along the coast to deny strategic ports to its principal naval rivals, France and Russia. It did not especially matter which state controlled sections along the coast, as long as they aligned with British naval interests in the Red Sea.

Conclusion

The 1870s might be termed the high-water mark of British indirect imperialism in the Red Sea. The opening of the new communications route to the East in 1869 gave a new strategic importance to the Red Sea, and the naval station at Aden proved to be an invaluable asset in

²²⁶ British Library, India Office Records, Memoranda on the Red Sea and Somali Coast, IOR/L/PS/20/MEM - - O41 : 1874-1896, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim to Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia; and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui, telegram from Lord Salisbury to the British Embassy, 13 September 1881.

securing British paramountcy over the new route. The scramble by other powers to secure similarly useful bases along the new waterway appeared to challenge Britain's long-standing naval dominance in this former backwater.

Cabinet ministers, eager to safeguard what was clearly going to become one of the principle arteries of the Empire, were under pressure to do so with minimal public expenditure. Long-overlooked islands were suddenly regarded as potential hostile bases. The native African tribes of the area, though having previously been officially recognised by past British governments, could not be expected to hold out indefinitely against the technological superiority of the maritime powers.

Devoid of any permanent population, Perim was quickly occupied under the pretence of building a lighthouse before it could be taken by the French. Elsewhere, local rulers were compelled to sign treaties agreeing not to permit the occupation or construction of naval bases by foreign governments without British permission. Along the African coastline, the recognition of Egypt's expanding empire south of Bab-el-Mandeb to Cape Guardafui proved to be a useful way of blocking Britain's primary maritime rivals in the region, France and Italy, from taking the Somali ports. When the Egyptians began crumbling under the pressure of Ethiopian counteroffensives in the Tigray by the end of the 1870s, the compliant Italians became a useful substitute in the ensuing power vacuum.

The negotiations over islands and compromise arrangements made by the British during this period reveal two underlying principles to British strategy in the region. The first was that northeastern Africa only mattered to Britain in terms of maritime security. Islands and territories were assessed for their potential for British or foreign naval stations, coaling depots, and lighthouses, but nothing more. No interest was ever shown in establishing trading posts, permanent settlements, or military stations to counter slave caravans.

The second principle was a refusal to expand Britain's political commitments by acquiring territory. Even the most binding treaty signed with the sultan of Socotra, for example, left the island independent of British rule. British authorities staunchly resisted the advice of officials to impose protectorates in Somalia and Lahej. Instead, they looked to secure territory from other Europeans by using local agents such as Egypt, a pattern which was repeated elsewhere in East Africa through the Sultanate of Zanzibar.²²⁷ This was mid-Victorian British power at its most potent, wielded subtly through influence and finance rather than brute military force. It was empire on the cheap, and it was utilised in other areas officially beyond British political control – South America and China being two particularly prominent examples. It essentially achieved the same ends as a more formal dominion, but left the British taxpayer free from the responsibility of paying for it.

The 1877 Anglo-Egyptian Slavery Convention typified this type of indirect influence. Cited by the historian and Africanist GN Sanderson as evidence of a developing British obsession with upholding paramountcy, the convention effectively allowed British domination over areas outside of formal imperial control.²²⁸ Paramountcy, Sanderson argued, allowed Britain to effectively expand its *de facto* empire without provoking hostility from jealous colonial rivals or the need to seek international recognition for colonial gains. Sanderson identified Lord Carnarvon as a proponent of this strategy, depicting him as a man determined to build an informal empire in central and eastern Africa, including Egypt all the way down to Lake Albert, Mozambique, and the Cape, in what he himself called a British 'Munro doctrine' [sic].²²⁹

It was a system which worked well in the Red Sea region during the 1870s. The system of indirect control lasted until the collapse of the Egyptian empire under the twin pressures of the Ethiopian War and the outbreak of a serious revolt in Sudan, the subject of the following chapter.

²²⁷ G.N. Sanderson, *England, Europe & the Upper Nile: A Study in the Partition of Africa, 1882-1899* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), 24.

²²⁸ Sanderson, 'The European Partition of Africa: Coincidence or Conjecture?', 21.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Chapter IV

Introduction

Britain's strategy of securing the African coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden through the territorial claims of a client state began unravelling in 1881. The 1880s would prove to be a decade of upheaval in the Red Sea region, and the collapse of the Egyptian colonial empire in Africa proved to be a turning point as it left a political vacuum along the entire littoral zone. The need to protect its strategic interests in this now-unguarded area forced Britain to adopt an increasingly interventionist posture. Even before 1881, the Egyptian colonial empire in Africa had been straining under the combined pressure of a crippling national debt, serious sustained droughts, and a disastrous war with Ethiopia. But that year, an obscure young cleric declared a *jihad* against the Ottoman-Egyptian administration, and what began as a localised rebellion quickly turned into a full-scale revolt. Riding on a wave of popular resentment, the self-proclaimed *Mahdi* and his followers ultimately succeeded in overthrowing the Egyptian colonial government in Sudan, replacing it with an aggressive, jihadist caliphate.

The rise of the Mahdist state upset the regional equilibrium and brought to an end Egypt's control of the northeast African coastline. As the Egyptian empire collapsed, the British attempted to stem the Mahdist tide by defending the Egyptian-controlled ports in the Red Sea. After seizing these ports and stabilising the local situation, Britain then faced the more serious threat of imperial counterclaims by rival Europeans struggling to expand their own naval footholds in the territories abandoned by the Egyptians.

As a result, for the first time since the 1868 punitive campaign in Abyssinia, Britain committed military forces to a series of expensive operations in the interior of northeastern Africa, entrenching itself militarily and politically into both Sudan and Somaliland. Whilst by 1885 the vast

Sudanese interior had been abandoned, the coastal territories would be parcelled out amongst the European powers, with Britain careful to take the lion's share after orchestrating a series of diplomatic clashes and military feints. By 1888, these arrangements were formalised through a series of treaties of protection and the demarcation of borders, and Parliament resolved to maintain a permanent military presence in the Red Sea ports under British control.

As this chapter will show, the transition from British indirect rule to formal control in northeastern Africa was carried out in reaction to the growing instability in the territories bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Previously, London was prepared to leave these remote and arid provinces under Egyptian control – in short, why pay to govern the area directly when the Egyptians could be relied upon to prevent other powers from seizing the Red Sea ports? Britain's commitment to Egypt's territorial claims only deepened following the occupation in 1882, and the government was compelled to deploy British troops to the strategic ports as Egypt's position in Africa steadily collapsed. Initially aiming to protect both the ports and Egypt proper from falling under Mahdist control and to contain the insurgents within the Upper Nile Valley, military occupation transformed these towns into *de facto* British possessions governed under British or Anglo-Egyptian administrations. Unwilling to shoulder the expense of governing the African coastline entirely alone, Britain oversaw the transfer of Massawa to the Italians in 1885 on the understanding it would block French expansion northwards from their base in Obokh.

The scale of the military operations, and the expensive fortifications built by the British at the ports under their control in the region indicate that operations were launched with an aim to secure the strategic waterway even as the regional balance of power underwent a profound transformation. Ultimately, these bases served to project British power inland, laying the foundation for the expansion of formal control into northeastern Africa. British regional paramountcy was vital to wider Imperial interests, and if it could not be achieved through indirect means more substantial steps would need to be taken.

The State of Egypt and the Egyptian Sudan

The shared geography of the River Nile has long bound together Egypt and Sudan, stretching back to the ancient period. At various times each has attempted to conquer the other, and in 1822 Muhammad Ali, the first-proclaimed Khedive and founder of modern Egypt,¹ became the latest in a series of Egyptian rulers to march southwards. In addition to winning riches and new recruits for his slave army, Ali aimed to establish Egypt as a first-rank imperial power.² The Sudanese coastline, including the principal ports of Suakin and Massawa, had been under direct control of the Ottoman Empire as part of the Hejaz governorate since the sixteenth century, but the interior was composed of weak native states. Suakin and Massawa had been important trading ports during the Middle Ages, but had since declined in importance as trade patterns shifted away from the Red Sea.³ The conquest of Sudan by Egypt, however, breathed new life into them as communication hubs between Cairo and its new southern dominions.

A quick glance at a modern map of Egypt and Sudan might suggest that the easiest way to travel or communicate between the two countries is simply overland from Egypt. However, in order to understand the importance which Suakin and Massawa represented to the new Egyptian Sudan, it is necessary to note that the Nile cataracts pose a serious obstacle to ships and travellers attempting to sail up the river to Khartoum. Although it is possible, as Ali himself demonstrated, to march an army south into Sudan, it will be forced to march along the river bank.⁴ The blazing, waterless deserts which separate Sudan from Egypt are interrupted only by the winding course of the River Nile, which meanders through hundreds of miles of desert in two great arcs.

¹ Henry Dodwell, *The Founder of Modern Egypt: A Study of Muhammad 'Ali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

² MW Daly and PM Holt, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, 5th edition (Harlow: Longman Publishing, 2000), 41.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

In contrast to the Nile, Suakin and Massawa were the easiest points of entry into this vast, new territory. Networks of roads from deep in the interior converged on both ports, and it was often quicker and easier for troops and supplies destined for Khartoum to be sailed down the Red Sea to Suakin, and then taken west by road through the mountains of the Eastern Sudan to the Nile.⁵

For that reason, in 1865, the Khedive Ismail persuaded the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz to turn over the ports to Egypt.⁶ Ali and his successors had pursued an expansionist policy in Sudan, pushing forward the colony's borders to the Abyssinian marches, the Sahara Desert in Darfur, and south towards the Great Lakes, but until 1865 the coast remained under direct Ottoman control. Ismail himself was an ambitious ruler, and he envisioned Egypt as an imperial power of European proportions. Crucial to this project would be the conquest of a vast, tropical African empire, stretching south to the Great Lakes, and east along the entire Somali coast all the way to Cape Guardafui. Controlling the Red Sea ports was central to this vision, as they represented the keys to sealing Egypt's domination over Sudan. Practically all trade from Sudan flowed out of the two harbours, and they had become the primary routes connecting Egypt with Khartoum.⁷ Egypt would therefore never truly control Sudan until it controlled the Sudanese ports.

Ismail's ambitious designs in Africa, however, came at an unsustainable financial cost, and the colonial government was forced to resort to levying increasingly higher taxes as Ismail pushed his borders further and further away from Cairo.⁸ By 1875, the Khedive had annexed Darfur and the far south (Equatoria), and he had also leased the Somali port of Zeyla from the Sultan.⁹ But his efforts to extend Egyptian control up the Blue Nile sparked a war with the Christian empire of Ethiopia. In February 1876, an army from Egypt which had been shipped south down the Red Sea to

⁵ British Library, London, Add MS 52397, Maps Collections, Edward Stanford, Ordnance Map, the Nile Provinces, London: 1886.

⁶ Ghada Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1979), 236.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸ A.B. Theobald, *The Madhiya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881-1899* (London: Longman, 1951), 26.

⁹ Czeslaw Jesman, 'Egyptian Invasion of Ethiopia,' *African Affairs* 58:230 (January 1959), 78.

Massawa, marched out of the city and into Ethiopian territory.¹⁰ The Ethiopians proceeded to rout the badly-organised Egyptian expeditionary force, and although further invasions were attempted by the Egyptians, all of them were crushed, weakening Egyptian military power in Sudan and the Red Sea littoral.

These costly and fruitless campaigns, coupled with the rapid expansion of territory under Egyptian control in the south and the west meant that military forces in Sudan became dangerously overstretched. Without railways and with a severely limited telegraph service, effectively controlling this massive territory became an enormous challenge for Egyptian officials.¹¹ Egyptian forces were scattered across Sudan in a series of small garrisons, and dispatching reinforcements or supplies from Egypt to distant posts was problematic as movement depended upon an underdeveloped road network. The total number of troops deployed to Sudan, a territory which measured nearly a million square miles, was a mere 40,000, almost all stationed in unfortified towns.¹² To compound the problem still further, movement across such vast distances of arid terrain was dependent on access to wells, which could easily be destroyed by rebel forces to deny whole areas to government troops.¹³

¹⁰ 'Egypt and Abyssinia,' *The Morning Post*, 1 February 1876.

¹¹ Theobald, *The Madhiya*, 26.

¹² P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881-1898: A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*

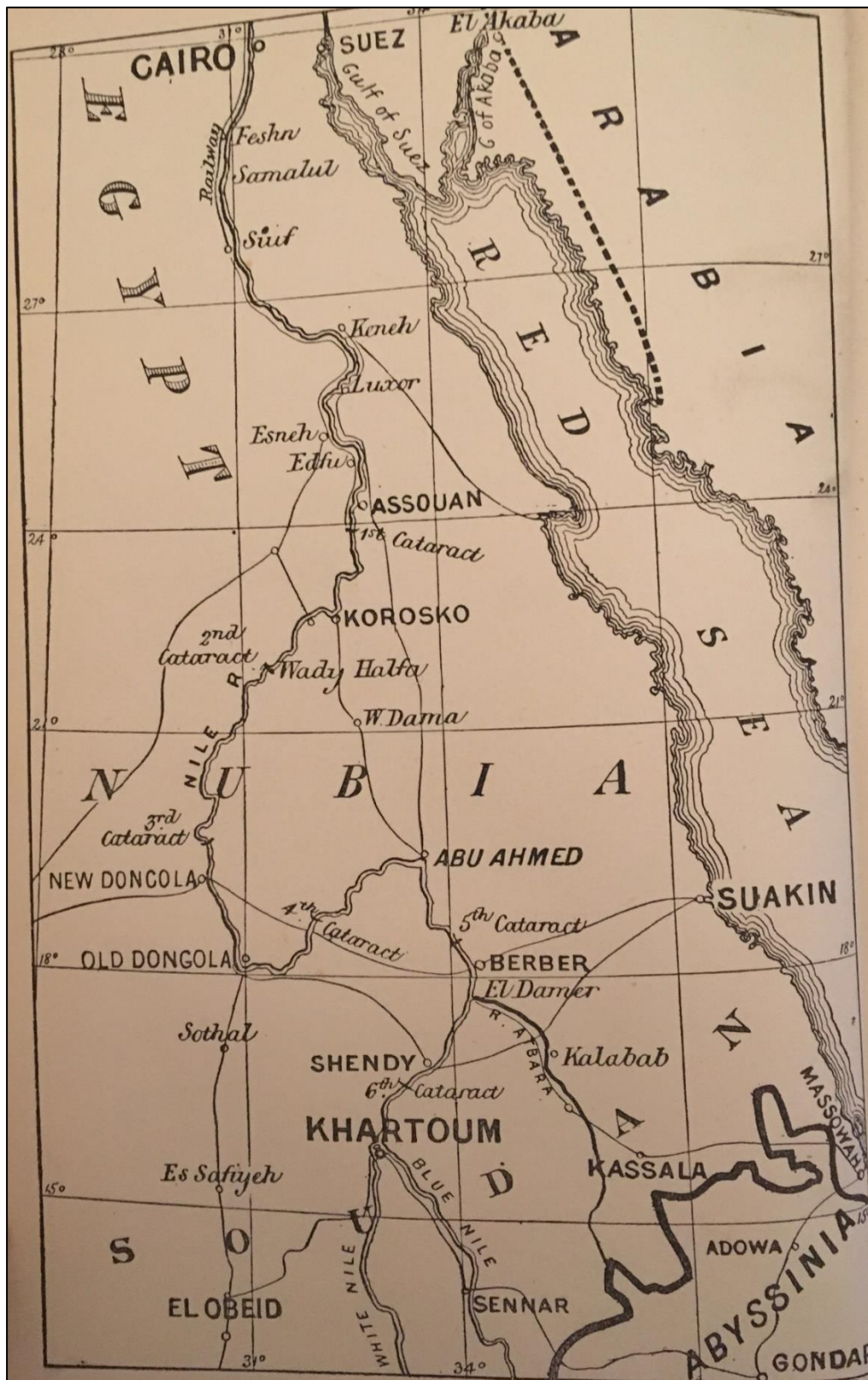


Figure 5: Contemporary map of eastern Sudan, showing importance of Suakin to regional communications.

Burleigh, Bennet. *General Map of Soudan*. Scale not given. In: Bennet Burleigh. *Desert Warfare*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1884, p. 1.

In fact, so remote was the territory that deployment to Sudan was often viewed as a punishment, and high-quality military commanders and civil administrators sought to avoid service in Sudan.¹⁴ Indeed, British officers in Egypt frequently reported witnessing conscripted *fellaheen* soldiers weeping upon hearing that they were being deployed to Sudan.¹⁵ Faced with a crisis in finding suitable personnel, Ismail turned to a series of Christian European administrators and explorers to help run his empire in Sudan, men such as Sir Samuel Baker and General Charles Gordon. Unfortunately for Ismail, these European officers often failed to hide their contempt for their Egyptian subalterns, and their high-handed attitudes frequently stirred up considerable resentment amongst the local Muslim population.¹⁶

More seriously, by the 1880s the Egyptian government was facing severe budget shortfalls both in Egypt proper as well as in Sudan. In Sudan, the costs for a strategic railway which was being planned were spiralling out of control, as was the cost of maintaining garrisons throughout the empire, and the continued campaigning in Ethiopia.¹⁷ In response, the administration in Khartoum imposed draconian measures to raise much-needed revenue. Increases in taxes are universally loathed, but the abolition of slavery and the vigorous extirpation of the slave trade had destroyed a key component of the Sudanese economy.¹⁸ Efforts to raise money from the local populace verged on outright extortion, and influential tribes such as the Baggara whose livelihood depended upon the lucrative trade in slaves, rapidly became alienated and disaffected from the colonial government.¹⁹

By 1879, Ismail was so heavily in debt that his European creditors, principally British and French, effectively controlled the country's finances and used their influence to impose unpopular

¹⁴ Theobald, *The Madhiya*, 26.

¹⁵ T. Douglas Murray and A. Silva White, *Sir Samuel Baker: A Memoir* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1895), 321.

¹⁶ Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881-1898*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ Churchill, *The River War*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

political reforms. An army revolt led by Colonel Ahmed Arabi broke out. Despite pressure from London and Paris, Ismail was either unwilling or unable to quell the insurrection. The exasperated British and French governments subsequently deposed Ismail, and replaced him with his young son Tewfik. This did nothing to quash the nationalist rebellion led by Arabi, who remained Egypt's *de facto* ruler until a British 'army of occupation' led by Sir Garnet Wolseley crushed the rebellious Egyptian forces at the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir in 1882 and occupied Cairo. Not only did Wolseley's victory signal an end to Egyptian independence, it also placed Egypt within Britain's sphere of influence – at the expense of France.

In addition to concerns over Egypt's debt payments, Britain's position reflected the growing realisation that the Empire was coming to depend upon the Suez Canal for the imperial communications and transport network, and that dependency now extended to Egypt and its dominions. Reporting on the ongoing battle at Tel-el-Kebir, for example, *The Times* asserted that 'the honour of England and the high interests of the Empire are involved in this fight...Egypt is, on the one hand, the key of the East, the meeting point of Europe and Asia, and the half-way house between England and her Asiatic Empire.'²⁰ Five days after Sir Garnet Wolseley's victory at Tel-el-Kebir, Baring wrote back to London explaining the conditions in Egypt. In his report, he argued that 'it is impossible altogether to separate the question of the Canal from the question of the internal administration of Egypt. Anarchy and confusion in Egypt would, or at all events might, involve danger to the Canal.'²¹ This was not merely a question of ships transiting the Suez Canal – shortly before Wolseley's intervention, the insurgents had dredged up the telegraph cable and severed it.²²

With Egypt gripped by the political turmoil caused by the Arabi revolt, the Egyptian administration in Sudan faced a perfect storm of widespread public resentment, a weak and

²⁰ 'Epitome of Opinion,' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 September 1882.

²¹ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/27-30, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Present Situation in Egypt, 18 September 1882.

²² Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy*, 66.

ineffective central government, and an armed and capable populace.²³ News of the collapse of khedivate spread through Sudan, and political chaos in Egypt made the government in Khartoum appear impotent.²⁴ The only thing which was lacking was a revolutionary leader able to unite the tribes of Sudan and to organise an armed rebellion.

The Mahdist Revolt of 1881

In 1881, this figure appeared. Muhammed Ahmed was born in 1845 to a family of boat builders in the northern Sudanese city of Dongola. At a young age, Ahmed was sent to receive an education in Islamic theology, and after receiving the title 'Sheikh' upon completing his education, he entered the Samaniyya Sufi sect,²⁵ a group noted for its emphasis on spiritual withdrawal and communitarianism.²⁶ Moving to Aba Island, an island in the Nile south of Khartoum, in 1870 he established his own mosque and began proselyting to the local tribes in the Gezira area. Although a dispute with a religious elder led to his expulsion from the order, Ahmed remained popular with the local population for his well-known piety and humility.²⁷

After gathering a loyal group of disciples of his own, in August 1881 Ahmed declared himself to be the Mahdi, or the Expected Guide.²⁸ The Mahdi is, according to Islamic tradition and eschatology, a leader who will appear to establish an earthly kingdom, restoring justice and the purity of the faith in preparation for the Day of Judgement.²⁹ Whilst the Mahdi is not referenced

²³ Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898*, 24.

²⁴ MW Daly and PM Holt, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, 5th edition (Harlow: Longman Publishing, 2000), 76.

²⁵ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, 23 November 1883.

²⁶ 'Khalwati Tariqah,' *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, John L. Esposito, ed. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1265> (accessed 07-Aug-2018).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Theobald, *The Madhiya*, 32.

²⁹ W. Madelung, "al-Mahdī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (eds.) Brill Online, 2015. Reference. King's College London. 23 December 2015 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mahdi-COM_0618>

directly in the Koran, he is mentioned several times in the hadith, and, according to Shi'ite tradition, is considered to be the twelfth Imam who is prophesied one day to return.³⁰ Along with the return of Christ, the Mahdi is expected to be one of the signs of the coming Apocalypse, and his temporal kingdom will precede the Day of Judgement.

Actual descriptions of the Mahdi are scant and differ depending on religious texts and tradition. Accordingly, debate over who the Mahdi is and what his return will be like has raged since the Umayyad period.³¹ Several figures in Islamic history have declared themselves to be the Mahdi, and doing so gave credibility and legitimacy to contemporary political agendas. In any case, Ahmed's growing crowd of followers evidently responded to his call to rise up against the hated 'Turks' – the general term for all Egyptians – and could do so with the full conviction that their actions would be met with divine approval.

The Egyptian administration in Khartoum responded to the declaration of the Mahdi and his call to arms by dispatching a small force of soldiers on steamers up the Nile to Aba Island.³² On 11 August 1881, government troops landed on the island, and their commander promised that the first one to capture the Mahdi would receive a cash reward.³³ Rushing to reach the island first and struggling ashore in the dark, the government troops were ambushed by a crowd of the Mahdi's followers armed with sticks, spears, and stones. In the darkness and the confusion, the soldiers were driven back, several were massacred by the local inhabitants and the survivors fled to the boats.³⁴

This was a tremendous moral victory for the Mahdi and his band of disciples, who appeared to have triumphed over improbable odds. The Mahdi's victory was proof that he was indeed the Expected Guide and was protected by the Almighty himself. Although Ahmed was forced to flee

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² 'The Late Crisis in Egypt,' *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 30 September 1881.

³³ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, 23 November 1883.

³⁴ Ibid.

from the Nile to a base in the remote Nuba Mountains of Kordofan province, his journey evoked the image of Mohammad's flight to Medina. He also consequently appeared to fulfil the prophecy that the Mahdi would come from the Atlas Mountains.³⁵

For the Egyptians, the battle on Aba Island would be the first of a string of similar disasters in which undisciplined, isolated units of *fellaheen* conscripts were repeatedly sent into the bush without any support, only to be ambushed and slaughtered by Mahdist insurgents.³⁶ Each victory brought the Mahdist movement more legitimacy, and more captured weapons. One of the only surviving records of the early stages of the Mahdist revolt is the account of Father Joseph Ohrwalder. Ohrwalder was an Austrian priest who had been captured by Mahdist forces in the Kordofan mountains in the summer of 1882. Though some of the more sensational episodes within the memoir were almost certainly exaggerated either by Ohrwalder or his English translator,³⁷ Ohrwalder did witness the infectious enthusiasm which spread throughout the Mahdi's followers following every successful battle during this time.³⁸ Repeated victories over incompetent Egyptian troops persuaded more and more Sudanese that Ahmed was indeed the Mahdi. Within a year of his declaration, Ahmed had gathered a sufficient number of followers to besiege the large town of El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan province located approximately 250 miles southwest of Khartoum.³⁹

After a gruelling six-month siege, the town fell, giving the Mahdi a proper capital from which to proclaim the founding of the Mahdist State.⁴⁰ This was a serious blow to the Egyptian colonial

³⁵ W. Madelung, "al-Mahdī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (eds.) Brill Online, 2015. Reference. King's College London. 23 December 2015 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mahdi-COM_0618>

³⁶ Theobald, *The Madhiya*, 34.

³⁷ The book, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*, was translated and published by Sir Reginald Windgate as part of a campaign to stir up moral outrage back in Britain in the hopes of putting pressure on the government to send a military expedition to Sudan. Following Kitchener's reconquest of Sudan and the destruction of the Mahdist state in 1898, Windgate was made the first Governor-General of the new Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

³⁸ Joseph Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp, 1882-1892*, Sir Francis Reginald Windgate, trans. (London: Low, 1892), 52.

³⁹ Theobald, *The Madhiya*, 43.

⁴⁰ Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*, 52.

government, as Mahdist forces had destroyed a considerable portion of the 40,000 troops stationed in Sudan.⁴¹ Furthermore, the capture of El Obeid cut the only road connecting Khartoum with the far western province of Darfur, choking off supplies and communication with the garrisons stationed there, all of which would eventually surrender or be destroyed. By January 1883, although the government still controlled the Nile and everything east of the river, its hold over Sudan was looking increasingly fragile.

The Revolt Spreads East

Until February 1883, the Mahdist revolt appeared to be contained to Kordofan, the large arid province to the west of the Nile. But news of the capture of El Obeid spread, and new disciples flocked to the promise of the *Mahdiya*. One of these was an astute former slave-dealer, Osman Digna, who was a native of Suakin.⁴² Osman's family were originally slave traders who had grown rich ferrying captives across the Red Sea to be sold at Jeddah.⁴³ In 1877, however, he was ruined when HMS *Wild Swan* captured a particularly large consignment of slaves. Leaving Suakin, the disaffected Osman had joined the Arabi revolt in Egypt against the British, and after returning to Sudan, he swore allegiance to the Mahdi at El Obeid in February 1883. In return, he was made Emir of the East, and ordered to cut off Khartoum from further reinforcements by capturing the road which led from Suakin to the Nile.⁴⁴

As a native Suakini who belonged to the same Beja ethnic group as the Hadendowa tribes who inhabited the mountains of the Eastern Sudan, Osman was in an advantageous position to rally the tribes to the Mahdi's cause. The Beja, though Muslim, are ethnically and linguistically distinct

⁴¹ Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*, 52.

⁴² Ibid., 64.

⁴³ Theobald, *The Mahdiya*, 64.

⁴⁴ Steven Serels, *Starvation and the State: Famine, Slavery, and Power in Sudan, 1883-1956* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 54.

from the Arab tribes of the Nile Valley, and live a pastoral lifestyle dependent on access on large tracts of land. Despite an unsuccessful Egyptian campaign to eradicate them during the 1840s, the Beja remained a constellation of independent clans, living in a state of rugged self-reliance in the Red Sea hills.⁴⁵

Returning to Eastern Sudan, Osman rallied the Hadendowa to the Mahdi's cause. By August 1883, he had put together an army of warriors from the Hadendowa tribes, which he used to attack the town of Sinkat, a town on the road connecting Suakin with the Nile.⁴⁶ Although the attack was repulsed, it sparked alarm in both Cairo and London, as 'it will be a most serious matter if the road to Khartoum is blocked...this is the only practicable route to the south of the Soudan, and by it Government stores and supplies are continually going, as well as reinforcements.'⁴⁷ The town was placed under a state of siege, which despite several relief attempts the Egyptians were unable to break. One of those killed outside Sinkat was Lyndeocho Moncrieff, the British consul at Suakin, who had accompanied the force as an observer.⁴⁸

These defeats, as well as the ambush of a relief expedition commanded by British officer William Hicks outside El Obeid which resulted in over 7,000 dead in November 1883, signalled that Egyptian control over Sudan was on the point of collapse.⁴⁹

The British Position

A comparison of Britain's reaction to Hicks' and Moncrieff's deaths is revealing because it illustrates the government's strategic priorities in the region. News of Hicks' defeat, when it arrived

⁴⁵ Daly and Holt, *A History of the Sudan*, 41.

⁴⁶ 'The Attack on Sinkat by the Bedouins,' *Daily News*, 29 August 1883.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, 23 November 1883.

⁴⁹ Sir Francis Reginald Wingate, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1891), 90.

weeks later, created a shockwave in London, and the government resolved that Egypt would evacuate its remaining garrisons and abandon Sudan.⁵⁰ Gladstone was ideologically opposed to Egyptian colonial rule over Sudan in the first place, and he viewed Sudan as nothing but an expensive luxury which Egypt could no longer afford. As Lord Granville, the Foreign Secretary, explained, 'it takes away somewhat of the position of a man to sell his racers and hunters, but if he cannot afford to keep them, the sooner they go to Tattersall's the better.'⁵¹ After the defeat at El Obeid, Gladstone demanded that the Khedive evacuate all remaining troops and trading stations in Sudan and leave it to the Mahdists.⁵² Any suggestion that British troops would be used to prop up the Egyptian regime in Khartoum was flatly refused, and Sir Evelyn Baring was firmly told that 'Her Majesty's Government have no intention of employing British or Indian troops in that province.'⁵³ Gladstone announced to Parliament that '[Sudan] has not been included in the sphere of our operations, and we are by no means disposed to admit without qualifications that it is within the sphere of our responsibility.'⁵⁴ As far as the British official mind was concerned, Sudan was a liability, a drain on the Egyptian treasury. If the Mahdists could be contained to the Upper Nile Valley, there was no need to take any further action.

Maintaining the *status quo* in the Red Sea was a different matter. Egyptian rule over the ports had to be supported, otherwise they would almost certainly fall to Mahdists, and once they were under Mahdist control, the insulation protecting the shipping lanes between Suez and Aden would be punctured. Upholding Egypt's claims to the shores of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden had been central to British strategy during the 1870s, and if the Egyptians were to lose control of the ports, they would become fair game for ambitious rivals.

⁵⁰ 'The Soudan,' *The Morning Post*, 22 November 1883.

⁵¹ Earl of Granville, December 1883, quoted in G.N. Sanderson, *England, Europe & the Upper Nile: A Study in the Partition of Africa, 1882-1899* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), 17.

⁵² James Morris, *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 445.

⁵³ Earl Granville to Sir Evelyn Baring, telegram, 13 Dec 1883, quoted in William Gattie and Henry Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan: Cause, Effect, and Remedy* (London: Sampson, Low and Marston, 1892), 45.

⁵⁴ William Gladstone, quoted in Charles Royle, *The Egyptian Campaigns, 1882 to 1885*, (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1886), 91.

Hence, when Baring learned of Moncrieff's death on 12 November, he immediately ordered HMS *Ranger* to Suakin 'to afford protection to British subjects in case of need.'⁵⁵ On 22 November, a second gunboat, HMS *Coquette*, arrived at Suakin, and Sir William Hewett, the Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies Station, was ordered by the Admiralty 'to maintain the authority of the Egyptian Government at Suakin, Massuah, and other ports in the Red Sea.'⁵⁶ Two days later, Baring wired London warning against the withdrawal troops from Egypt, pointing out the vulnerability of the ports and of the southern Egyptian frontier. The Secretary of State for War, the Marquess of Hartington, concurred and telegraphed Baring back, assuring him that the troops would remain in Egypt under the present circumstances.⁵⁷ When the Cabinet asked for an explanation, Hartington declared that it was absolutely necessary to deploy naval forces to the port, as Suakin must be held in order to defend the route to India.⁵⁸ Additional ships were deployed in December and the town was declared to be under a state of siege.⁵⁹

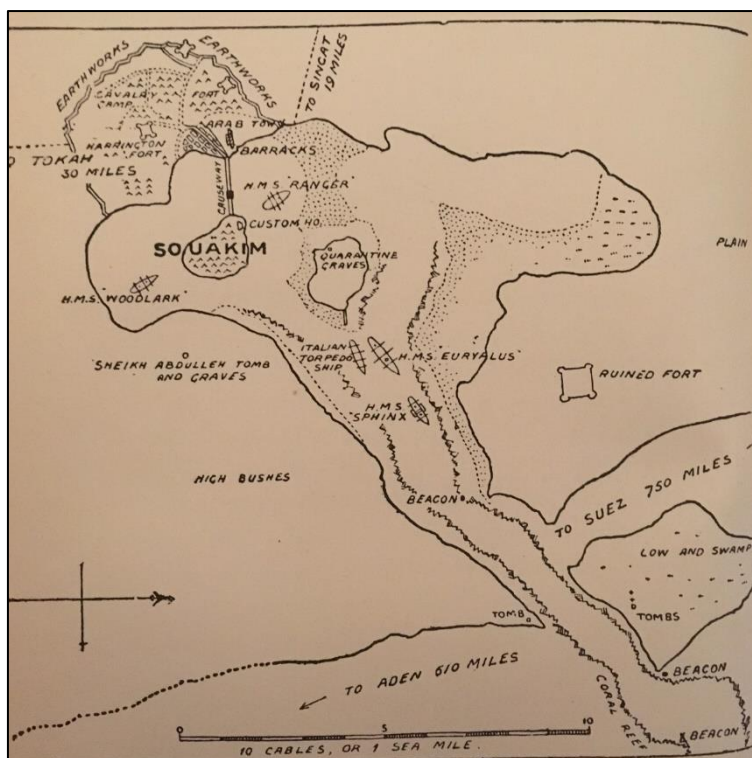


Figure 6: Suakin, December 1883. *Ranger* and *Woodlark* were stationed to provide covering fire along the causeway connecting Suakin Island with the mainland, whilst *Sphinx* acted as communications headquarters. The fortifications depicted on this map are of Egyptian design and construction.

Bennet Burleigh, *The Defences of the Port of Suakim*.
Bennet Burleigh, *Desert Warfare* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), 21.

⁵⁵ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, 23 November 1883.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: the Official Mind of Imperialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1981), 133.

⁵⁹ Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, 192.

On 30 December, Admiral Hewett and Valentine Baker, a disgraced former British officer now in the service of the Khedive's army,⁶⁰ were sent from Suakin down to Massawa to assess the situation and to review the garrison. Upon finding the Egyptian troops there in a deplorable state of unpreparedness, Hewett and Baker attempted to dissuade the powerful Ethiopian warlord Ras Alula from attacking the port.⁶¹ They also cautioned the Admiralty that unless support was sent soon, the town would soon be captured, either by the Ethiopians or the Mahdists.⁶² Significantly, in his report back to London, Hewett warned that if the Egyptians lost Massawa, the port would be open for a stronger power to take, most seriously France. His report stated that, 'the French evidentially...aspire to the acquisition of a port on the African shore of the Red Sea with a caravan route from the interior' and that with an established naval foothold in the region, they would also 'gain the Abyssinians over to French view.'⁶³ This warning perfectly captures the strategic challenge which Britain found itself facing in the 1880s. Britain could no longer insulate the waterway from Great Power rivals through the territorial claims of Egypt along its shorelines. The Mahdists were, of course, the most immediate threat to the ports, but on the distant horizon silently cruised the warships of European powers, eager, the British assumed, to profit from Egypt's downfall.

Hewett's concerns over the security of the ports were also echoed in the War, Foreign, and India offices, and in the Admiralty. In early January 1884, Lord Granville requested the Admiralty send ships to bolster the defences of Berbera and Zeyla, the two Egyptian ports on the Gulf of Aden. 'His Lordship is of the opinion that the Egyptian ports in the Gulf of Aden should be protected by the presence of British vessels,' his secretary explained.⁶⁴ The Earl of Kimberley, the Secretary of State for India, agreed, and added that he 'hopes that this protection may be afforded especially to

⁶⁰ Murray and White, *Sir Samuel Baker*, 321

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO39-43, India Office Records Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Admiral Sir William Hewett to the Secretary to the Admiralty, report, 7 January 1884.

⁶⁴ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Sir Julian Pauncefote to the Secretary of the Admiralty, letter, 3 January. 1884.

Berbera, on which Aden depends in great measure for its food supplies.⁶⁵ In Cairo, Lieutenant-General Frederick Stephenson, commander of the British army of occupation of Egypt, began sending out scouting parties south of Aswan, to assess the feasibility of constructing fortifications on the Egyptian-Sudanese frontier near Wadi Halfa and for possible routes for advances up the Nile.⁶⁶

At the same time, the Cabinet formulated its official response to the situation in Sudan. On 4 January, the Cabinet agreed that 'all military operations, excepting those necessary for the rescue of outlying garrisons, should cease.'⁶⁷ It reiterated that Egypt would abandon Sudan, and decided that the Eastern Sudan would be returned to Ottoman administration. The responsibility for pacifying the Hadendowa would fall to Turkish troops. Gladstone wrote in his diary that he was personally 'glad to see them bring the Turks into the Red Sea Ports,'⁶⁸ and decided to draw a line at Wadi Halfa, everything south of which was to be abandoned.⁶⁹ However, the Cabinet stressed that, although it was forcing Egypt to divest herself of Sudan, 'Her Majesty's Government were, on their part, prepared to assist in maintaining order in Egypt Proper, and in defending it, as well as in continuing to protect the ports of the Red Sea.'⁷⁰ Two days later, the Egyptian government was officially informed of the decision, resulting in the resignation of the Council of Ministers which refused to abandon Sudan. An entirely new, and more amenable, council had to be quickly installed on 7 January 1884.⁷¹

In addition to the Mahdist threat, Egypt's Red Sea territory was already being seriously challenged by Ethiopian forces by 1883. Repeated Egyptian incursions into the Ethiopian Empire had

⁶⁵ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, J.A. Godley to Sir Julian Pauncefote, Confidential Letter, 7 January 1884.

⁶⁶ National Archives, Kew, Add. Ms. WO33/42, War Office Records, Confidential Report Quarter-Master General, Horse Guards, 7 January 1884.

⁶⁷ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, February 1884.

⁶⁸ William Gladstone, *The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. HCG Matthew (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 94.

⁶⁹ Bennet Burleigh, *Desert Warfare: Being the Chronicle of the Eastern Soudan Campaign* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884) 3.

⁷⁰ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, February 1884.

⁷¹ Ibid.

been beaten back in the 1870s by the Emperor Johannes IV, who responded with his own counteroffensives. In mid-1883, the Ethiopians marched north to besiege the important Egyptian stronghold of Kassala, and east towards the port of Massawa.⁷² The Egyptians used Massawa as a base from which to launch raids on trade caravans travelling in northern Ethiopia, and had imposed a blockade on imports through the port.⁷³ The Ethiopians trounced Egyptian troops in a series of skirmishes outside of Massawa, sending the city into a state near panic, according to official observers on the scene.⁷⁴ Osman Digna even extended diplomatic feelers to Johannes IV and his renowned military commander, Ras Alula, suggesting that they should combine their forces against the Egyptians.⁷⁵

Moreover, along with Egypt, the British had become increasingly aware of how dependent the Empire was on the Red Sea. The imperial government, and especially the Indian government, became ever more sensitive to affairs in the sea and the Gulf of Aden as traffic and communication through the Suez Canal increased. In February 1882, for example, before the intervention in Egypt, the British Political Resident in Aden started sending intelligence reports on French and Italian activity in the sea to the government in Bombay. According to one of his reports, a spy had discovered that French and Italian agents were attempting to purchase a small port near the Hanish Islands, an archipelago near the southern mouth of the sea.⁷⁶ Although the resident believed the likelihood of discovering potential harbours in the islands was low, he was concerned about 'the disturbing effect produced in the neighbourhood by the recent action of the two powers alluded to.'⁷⁷ His letter verifies that there were indeed ongoing attempts by the French and the Italians to expand their naval power into the region. Although they had not yet succeeded in establishing naval

⁷² Anthony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea: the History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 101.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Confidential Letter from the Political Resident Aden to the Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 20 February 1882.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

bases, in his assessment, French and Italian activity was stirring up excitement amongst the native tribes, which could undermine Egyptian authority on the strategic coastline.⁷⁸

His letter also brings up an important point regarding power projection in such a harsh environment. With the hot climate, limited access to fresh water on the barren islands and coastline, and a chronic shortage of reliable maps and navigational charts, building a port or naval base from scratch would be a formidable challenge for any of the maritime powers. The existing ports in the region, all nominally under Egyptian control, were the only realistic locations from which to establish a naval station capable of supporting a cruiser squadron. Both Italy and France were repeatedly frustrated by these geographical limitations in their attempts to create naval bases in the Red Sea.

Hence, as long as the Red Sea ports remained officially Egyptian, the sea was insulated by the British-controlled Suez Canal in the north and the great imperial fortress of Aden in the south. Despite the technical challenges of establishing new ports in the region, even before the fall of El Obeid to the Mahdi in 1882 there were calls in Whitehall for Britain to take a more proactive stance. Sir Edward Hertslet was a senior adviser in the Foreign Office who had accompanied Disraeli to the Congress of Berlin as an expert on the Eastern Question.⁷⁹ As early as 1882, Hertslet warned that in order to retain its naval dominance in the region, Britain needed to annex more islands and ports to prevent them from falling into French and Italian hands.⁸⁰ Hertslet noted that at this time, outside of Aden, Britain only controlled the island of Perim, which as had been previously discovered, could not secure the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. Accordingly, Hertslet officially recommended to the Foreign Secretary that naval parties be sent out to claim harbours in the Red Sea, before others reached them first.⁸¹ In particular, he singled out Zeyla, which could be easily occupied from Aden, and

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ R. A. Jones, 'Hertslet, Sir Edward (1824–1902)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33840>, accessed 25 Dec 2015].

⁸⁰ Sir Edward Hertslet, 'Memorandum on French and Italian Designs in the Red Sea and its immediate Neighbourhood,' Foreign Office, 6 March 1882. In Steven Smith, ed., *The Red Sea Region: Sovereignty, Boundaries & Conflict, 1839-1967*, vol. 1 Arabian Geopolitics 6 Regional Documentary Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Suakin and Massawa, which were 'positions of some advantage for the nation whose trade with the East and with Australia passes their doors.'⁸²

Hertslet's advice was not acted upon immediately, perhaps because until 1883, Egypt's rule over the Red Sea ports appeared secure. However, the Admiralty did decide to create a permanent Red Sea and Gulf of Aden squadron for the first time in January 1883.⁸³ Although Royal Navy gunboats had been regularly cruising the Red Sea since the 1860s, these were temporary detachments from the general East Indies station. It was not until 1883 that a dedicated naval division was set up to protect British interests in the strategic waterway, made up of a detachment of large, well-armed screw sloops.⁸⁴

Finally, it is also important to note that some of Britain's strategic concerns about the Mahdi related to the spread of radical *jihad* throughout the Muslim population of India. There was already a fear within the British political establishment regarding the possibility of a general Islamic uprising.⁸⁵ As long as the Ottoman Sultan retained his status as Caliph of Islam and remained under British influence, it was felt, this was a risk which could be mitigated. But as the Ottoman Empire appeared to weaken, some in Britain believed that fanaticism could spread throughout the Muslim world. During the Balkans Crisis in 1875 Lord Lytton, the future Viceroy of India, for example, worried about 'the effect on our Muhammedan subjects in India, and yet more upon the Muhammedan Populations in Central Asia, of a collapse of the Turkish Power in Europe.'⁸⁶ Clearly, part of his concern was that prestige, in this case of the Ottomans, must be upheld as the best guarantor of Muslim subservience.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Hubert Dowding, Captain Downing to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, Half-Yearly Report on the Slave Trade in Aden and the Red Sea Division, 1 January 1883, in *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 5, Anita Burdett, ed. (Chippenhams: Archive Editions, 1993), 538.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Benjamin D. Hopkins, 'Islam and Resistance in the British Empire,' in *Islam and the European Empires*, David Motadel, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 161.

⁸⁶ Earl of Lytton, quoted in T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 129.

This sentiment can be seen in the reaction to the intervention in Egypt in 1882. If Arabi had been able to defeat the British expeditionary force sent to Egypt, the myth of British invincibility and effortless superiority over the natives would have faced a serious challenge. A victory over British troops would be enough, perhaps, to encourage violence, or even a second Indian Mutiny, and radicalism would spread across the Muslim world. As *The Spectator* reported to its readers after the battle:

Had Sir Garnet Wolseley been foiled, had he even been detained for weeks, as the Russians were before Plevna, all Asia might have risen on the whites, and a war have commenced to which this campaign against Arabi would have been child's play. Within a week, every detail will be known in Mecca, and the Asiatic world will have decided by a plebiscite no reflection will reverse that, in the unaccountable province of God, the hour for slaughtering the swine-eating infidels is not yet.⁸⁷

Similarly, when the British government commissioned an intelligence report to be compiled on the ongoing Mahdist rebellion in late 1883, its author warned that the Mahdi's ultimate aims were to 'gain over the whole of the Sudan to his cause, then march on Egypt and overthrow the false-believing Turks, and, finally, to establish the thousand years' kingdom in Mecca, and convert the whole world....all who opposed his mission were to be destroyed, whether Christian, Mohammedan, or Pagan.'⁸⁸ The outbreak of a religious uprising therefore represented more than simply a threat to the established *status quo* in northeastern Africa. Potentially, the Cabinet was warned, it could lead to far more serious problems throughout the Empire.

Indeed, the Army Intelligence Department believed that failing to launch an effective counteroffensive against the Mahdi would lead to an invasion of Egypt from the south, supported by a rebellious and sympathetic populace. The department's memorandum to the Secretary of State for War pointed out that the Mahdi had pledged to overthrow Egypt in his wider quest to conquer an

⁸⁷ 'Epitome of Opinion', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 September 1882.

⁸⁸ British Library, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, 23 November 1883.

Earthly caliphate in preparation for the Day of Judgement, a kingdom which would include all of the Middle East and North Africa.⁸⁹ The report detailed a history of insurrections in Islam dating back to the eighth century, and predicted that, even if the Mahdi failed to conquer Egypt, his message would ignite a general Islamic rising against Europe. 'The great Zaouia in the Libyan desert has been enlarged, and the Senussitis look anxiously for the day when El-Mahdi shall fulfil a second prophecy and reign from Tangier to Tripoli in Syria, the much longed for Arab empire of the future.'⁹⁰ Consequently, when Mahdist troops destroyed the last Egyptian army in Sudan and laid siege to Egypt's only strongholds in Eastern Sudan, the British government was put under the combined pressure of defending the shipping route to India and confronting the potential outbreak of worldwide *jihad*.

The Battle of El Teb and the Changing Military Calculus in the Region

For the remainder of 1883, the British government's policy was to secure the Egyptian ports from the sea. Gunboats cruising up and down the coast could enforce Egypt's claim to territory, and warships stationed inside harbours could bolster the local defences with naval artillery and Royal Marines. Events in January and February 1884, however, persuaded the British government to change its strategy from shoring up Egypt's rapidly eroding suzerainty over the coasts with gunboats, to more direct methods of imperial control with land forces.

Despite the wishes of Gladstone's ministry, the Egyptian government decided to make one last attempt to relieve the town of Tokar, to Suakin's southwest, which was one of the last outposts of Egyptian authority along the Sudanese coastline. Led by disgraced former British military officer

⁸⁹ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Memorandum on certain subjects having reference to the possibility of an Invasion of Egypt Proper from the Upper Nile, 22 January 1884.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Valentine Baker, the Tokar expedition was also ambushed and destroyed at the wells of El Teb, highlighting the precariousness of Egypt's position along the Red Sea littoral.

This was not lost on the public in Britain, and when news of the latest defeat reached London, there was widespread outrage and calls for the government to avenge 'Baker's Teb.' The *Glasgow Herald* called the battle 'a disgraceful defeat for our army,'⁹¹ and *The Pall Mall Gazette* criticised the government for its 'vacillating and inconsistent' response to the debacle.⁹² In the House of Commons, the Opposition demanded to know 'whether Her Majesty's Government are able to state what steps they propose to take to check the fanatical revolution in the Soudan which threatens the peace and Egypt' and 'whether the Prime Minister would state what steps Her Majesty's Government were prepared to take to secure the safety of the garrisons at Sinkat and Tokar.'⁹³ Even Queen Victoria wrote to the Prime Minister, declaring that 'she feels very strongly about the Soudan and Egypt, and she must say she thinks a blow must be struck, or we shall never be able to convince the Mohammedans that they have not beaten us....It would be a disgrace to the British name [otherwise], and the country will not stand for it.'⁹⁴

The defeat at El Teb immediately put Gladstone under pressure to send troops to Eastern Sudan to protect Suakin, to rescue the besieged garrisons at Tokar and Sinkat. Unwelcome parallels were drawn between the defeat at El Teb and the defeat three years earlier at Majuba Hill, and in both Parliament and in the general press, Gladstone faced a growing clamour to *do something* about the Mahdists. As one scholar put it, 'press agitation at home proved too much for the Government...[and] the public had their attention diverted...to the supposed threat to British

⁹¹ 'Another Disaster in the Soudan,' *Glasgow Herald*, 6 February 1884. The newspaper's editors, and presumably some of its readers, curiously seemed to have overlooked the fact that it was the Egyptian army which had been defeated, not the British.

⁹² 'The Vital Question,' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 February 1884

⁹³ Ellis Ashmead-Barlett, Speech to the House of Commons, 7 February 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 284 (1884), 201.

⁹⁴ Queen Victoria to William Gladstone, letter, 12 February 1884, quoted in *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, vol. III, comp. and ed. George E. Buckle (London: John Murray, 1928), 447.

prestige on the Red Sea coast.⁹⁵ In spite of the Prime Minister's initial refusal to send troops to Sudan under any circumstances, the evolving situation in the Eastern Sudan forced him to start making concessions.⁹⁶

Within the Cabinet too, there was pressure to react to Osman's victory. In January when Baker's expedition was being prepared for deployment to the East, Baring warned the Cabinet that if it failed, the Khedive was prepared to return the Red Sea ports to Ottoman administration.⁹⁷ Although Gladstone himself cared 'France notwithstanding,...more that we keep out of the Soudan than who goes in,'⁹⁸ a powerful coalition of figures in the War Office, the Admiralty, the Foreign Office, and the India Office began to emerge in favour of deploying ground forces to Eastern Sudan to prevent the ports from being handed over to any power other than Britain

This alliance included the Earl of Kimberley, the Secretary of State for India; the Marquess of Hartington, the Secretary of State for War; Sir Charles Dilke, the President of the Local Government Board; and even to some extent, Lord Granville, the Foreign Secretary. Of this group of five men, three had attended Christ Church, Oxford (Kimberley and Northbrook concurrently), and Dilke, Granville, and Kimberley had all served in the Foreign Office. Moreover, both Hartington and Northbrook had acted as Undersecretaries of State in the India Office, as well as in both the Admiralty and the War Office.^{99 100} Baring and Northbrook were first cousins, and Baring had served

⁹⁵ John Wallis, 'A Forgotten Campaign,' *Blackwood's Magazine* 317, no. 1912 (1975), 119.

⁹⁶ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37, Cabinet Minutes and Papers: Photographic Copies of Cabinet Papers, Secret Memorandum on the Egyptian Debate, 1 February 1884.

⁹⁷ British Library, London, Add.MS 44645, 2nd Earl Granville: Minutes and memoranda by: 1853-1886, Sir Evelyn Baring to the Cabinet, letter, 2 January 1884.

⁹⁸ William Gladstone to Lord Granville, letter, 7 January 1884, quoted in Agatha Ramm, ed., *The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone and Lord Granville 1876-1886*, vol. II 1883-1886 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 146.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Parry, 'Cavendish, Spencer Compton, Marquess of Hartington and eighth duke of Devonshire (1833-1908)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32331>, accessed 8 March 2016].

¹⁰⁰ David Steele, 'Baring, Thomas George, first earl of Northbrook (1826-1904)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30586>, accessed 8 March 2016].

as Northbrook's private secretary during his reign as Viceroy of India.¹⁰¹ This group was interconnected by blood, education, and professional experience, and all would have been keenly aware of questions relating to strategy and international relations. Indeed, Dilke, a close personal friend of Joseph Chamberlain, would re-emerge as a proponent of imperial defence in the 1890s after a sex scandal ruined his Parliamentary career in 1886,¹⁰² even publishing a book on the subject in 1897.¹⁰³ In fact, these men became the champions of military interventions and imperial expansion in the Red Sea region, challenging Gladstone whose own position on the issue was more nuanced.¹⁰⁴

Hartington and Northbrook were the most vocal of the ring, and Hartington spoke directly with Gladstone on 7 February requesting that a Cabinet meeting be held to discuss the possibility of intervention in the Eastern Sudan. Gladstone replied that 'it would be strange...to adopt a measure which would alter fundamentally the whole basis of our position as to the Soudan,'¹⁰⁵ but nevertheless consented to a meeting held the following day.¹⁰⁶ Queen Victoria's Speech from the Throne on 5 February had already confirmed that British troops would continue to be stationed in Egypt to prevent the Lower Nile from being overrun by the Mahdists,¹⁰⁷ and HMS *Sphinx* had been ordered to cruise along the Somaliland coast to report on the garrisons in Zeyla and Berbera.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ J. G. Darwin, 'Baring, Evelyn, first earl of Cromer (1841–1917)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30583>, accessed 8 March 2016].

¹⁰² Roy Jenkins, 'Dilke, Sir Charles Wentworth, second baronet (1843–1911)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32824>, accessed 8 March 2016].

¹⁰³ Sir Charles Dilke, *Imperial Defence* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1897).

¹⁰⁴ James Morris, *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 498.

¹⁰⁵ William Gladstone to Lord Granville, letter, 7 February 1884, quoted in Ramm, *The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone and Lord Granville*, 154.

¹⁰⁶ National Archives, Kew, PRO/30/29/144, Correspondence and Memoranda: Cabinet Opinions, Marquess of Hartington to Lord Granville, letter, 7 February 1884.

¹⁰⁷ National Archives, Kew, CAB 41, Queen Victoria, Speech from the Throne, 5 February 1884.

¹⁰⁸ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37, Cabinet Minutes and Papers: Photographic Copies of Cabinet Papers, Secret Memorandum on the Egyptian Debate, 6 February 1884.

Nevertheless, Hartington wanted to discuss what further steps could be taken to safeguard British interests in this strategically-sensitive region.

As it turned out, the Cabinet meeting held on 8 February proved to be something of a turning point. Firstly, the government agreed that it would commit itself to defending the Red Sea ports using naval forces,¹⁰⁹ and on Baring's advice, the Cabinet formally requested the Khedive to appoint Hewett as commander of all military forces in Suakin.¹¹⁰ The garrison in the port now consisted of a squadron of Royal Navy gunboats and Egyptian troops, with a detachment of Royal Marines and Bluejackets to help man the forts and surrounding earthworks.

After this interim measure had been decided, George Tryon, Secretary to the Admiralty, then presented a proposal for a final settlement for the Red Sea's African coastline. Although ostensibly his own plan, given that he was a respected and well-connected senior officer, it is likely that Tryon represented the opinion of the Admiralty itself. Tryon correctly observed that effective Egyptian control over the African coast had ended and without outside intervention it was only a matter of time before the Egyptian-occupied ports fell into enemy hands – Mahdist, Italian or French. British recognition of Egyptian sovereignty along the coast backed by a naval presence in the Red Sea would no longer be sufficient to secure British interests in the region without guaranteed control over the ports.¹¹¹

In response, Tryon argued that Britain should assume direct responsibility for the primary regional ports, Zeyla, Berbera, Suakin, and Massawa. The French and Italians, harmlessly confined to their small harbours at Assab and Obokh, would be denied access to the deep-water anchorages capable of supporting cruiser squadrons. Meanwhile, by controlling the termini of trade networks

¹⁰⁹ British Library, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, March 1884.

¹¹⁰ British Library, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Confidential Memorandum on the Insurrection of the False Prophet, March 1884.

¹¹¹ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37, Cabinet Minutes and Papers, Photographic Copies of Cabinet Letters in the Royal Archives, Secretary of the Admiralty to the Cabinet, Confidential Memorandum, 8 February 2018.

from the interior, Britain would be able to extend indirect influence over the interior states, Sudan and Ethiopia.¹¹²

The key advantage to Tryon's plan was its cost-effectiveness; only a few troops and a Resident would need to be garrisoned to secure each port and 'no territorial acquisition of the interior would be required'. In effect, Britain would maintain its dominance over the waterway at little further expense to the British taxpayer, avoiding the burdens associated with formal imperial rule. It was nevertheless inherently aggressive in that it advocated projecting British naval power along the entire coastline and forcibly establishing a monopoly over regional trade. Evoking the expansionist Forward policy on the northwest frontier of India, Tryon declared 'we should act in this respect as much as we are acting on the Afghan frontier'.¹¹³

Lord Northbrook made it clear that he agreed entirely with Tryon's proposal. 'Captain Tryon has very much expressed the views which I myself entertain to the position which we should assume in the Red Sea.'¹¹⁴ As Northbrook pointed out, the defeat at El Teb proved how fragile Egyptian rule over the African coast truly was, and even with the support of Royal Navy warships, Egyptian control over the ports was no longer guaranteed. Once the gunboats and cruisers were withdrawn (as eventually they must), there was a serious risk that the towns would be cut off, besieged, or abandoned by their garrisons. The presence of British or Indian troops was therefore the only way of ensuring that the ports did not fall into the hands of the native tribes or to the French and Italians, who would look for opportunities to exploit the collapse of the Egyptian empire. Uncooperative Egyptian governors would be forcibly removed if necessary. As Tryon had noted, this promised to secure British control over the waterway without making expensive commitments to African territory.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37, Cabinet Minutes and Papers, Photographic Copies of Cabinet Letters in the Royal Archives, Lord Northbrook to the Cabinet, Confidential Memorandum, 8 February 1818.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Gladstone accepted the necessity of protecting the Red Sea ports, but he was committed to his policy of withdrawal from Sudan.¹¹⁶ He objected to the deployment of ground forces to Eastern Sudan, despite a growing sentiment within the Cabinet that ships alone could not protect the ports from Osman Digna's forces. Sir Garnet Wolseley attended the 8 February Cabinet meeting and proposed that four battalions of infantry from Malta should be shipped down to Suakin 'with a view to the infliction of severe chastisement upon the Arab forces,'¹¹⁷ to which Gladstone had 'many objections'¹¹⁸ and even described as 'sickening.'¹¹⁹ At the insistence of Northbrook, Dilke, and Hartington, however, he did consent to telegraphing General Charles Gordon for his expert opinion.¹²⁰

This decision proved ultimately to be a crucial one. Gordon had famously been sent by the Cabinet to Khartoum to oversee the evacuation of the remaining Egyptian garrisons across the country before abandoning the territory.¹²¹ Gordon's mission was, in effect, to liquidate all of Egypt's assets in Sudan before returning to Britain. A skilled military commander and with previous experience having served as Governor-General of the Egyptian Sudan, the Cabinet trusted Gordon implicitly.¹²²

Unbeknownst to the Cabinet though, Gordon had an entirely different interpretation of his mission to Sudan. His private conversations with Sir Gerald Graham, his friend and confidant, recorded in Graham's diary revealed that Gordon never had any intention of abandoning Sudan.

¹¹⁶ William Gladstone to Lord Granville, letter, 11 March, quoted in Ramm, *The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone and Lord Granville*, 163.

¹¹⁷ Editorial Note, *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, 477.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ HCG Matthew ed., *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. XI July 1883-December 1886 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 113.

¹²⁰ British Library, London, Add.MS 44645, 2nd Earl Granville: Minutes and memoranda by: 1853-1886, William Gladstone, Personal minutes of Cabinet meeting, 8 February 1884.

¹²¹ Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Gordon, Charles George (1833-1885)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11029>, accessed 28 Dec 2015].

¹²² A Egmont Hake, ed., *The Journals of Major-General C.G. Gordon, CB, at Khartoum*, 1885. Reprint (London: Darf Publishers, 1984), xxiii.

Shortly before being tasked by the Cabinet with the evacuation of Sudan, Gordon had been approached by Leopold II of Belgium, requesting him to serve as Governor-General of the Congo Free State.¹²³ Leopold relied upon explorers and adventurers such as Henry Morton Stanley to stake claims to territory in the Congo basin under the cover of sham charitable organisations which the King himself controlled.¹²⁴ Leopold operated under the pretext of simple humanitarianism in order to carve out his one-man colony in central Africa, the Congo Free State, without arousing the jealousies of the imperial Powers.¹²⁵ In 1884, Leopold expressed his interest in adding the provinces to be 'abandoned by Egypt'¹²⁶ to his massive, private super-state in the Congo, and he invited Gordon, the former Governor-General of the Egyptian Sudan to a private meeting before he departed back to Sudan. Leopold was determined to seize the Nile for his burgeoning empire. 'It is my panache, and I will never give it up!' the King once exclaimed to one of his prime ministers.¹²⁷

On his journey to Khartoum, Gordon shared with Graham his plan to raise a native army of Sudanese to combat the Mahdi, before reconquering Sudan (which the Khedive had already agreed to formally relinquish) and annexing it to the Congo Free State, whose borders would then stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.¹²⁸ In return, Leopold would pay Gordon £100,000, and pledged to appoint him viceroy to rule over this vast dominion.¹²⁹ And so, when the Cabinet requested Gordon's opinion on whether or not a force should be sent to Eastern Sudan to crush Osman Digna and the Hadendowa, he had every reason to answer in the affirmative. Indeed, months later he would write in his famous journals from Khartoum that the Red Sea ports were 'perfectly useless' unless the rest of Sudan was controlled as well.¹³⁰

¹²³ Davenport-Hines, 'Gordon, Charles George (1833–1885)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹²⁴ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan Books, 2006), 96.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Diary entries 31 January – 2 February 1884, in Robert H. Vetch, *Life, Letters, and Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Graham* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1901), 257

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Hake, *The Journals of Major-General C.G. Gordon, CB, at Khartoum*, 208.

As these discussions were playing out in Cabinet, across the road the War Office was holding its own internal meetings on the question of Aden and its defences. When news of Baker's defeat reached London, a committee of three senior engineers, including the Inspector-General of Fortifications, was formed to discuss the situation at Aden. Although the 1879 Carnarvon Commission and Sir Andrew Clarke, the IGF, had already recommended upgrading the defensive works at the station, by February 1884 work had still not commenced and the War Office decided to hold an inquiry into the matter.¹³¹ The 1879 commission had recommended a budget of £128,000 to be spent on the fortifications at Aden, and 'with French activities [in the Red Sea] in mind the committee decided that the question of the fortification was assuming increasing importance.'¹³² Lord Hartington, on the basis of the advice of the Carnarvon Commission, agreed to purchase five 10-inch armour-piercing breech loading artillery guns, nine of the standard 64-pounder coastal defence guns used in works across the United Kingdom, and a supply of mines to be laid in the harbour.¹³³

The India Office took an especial interest in the project, for obvious reasons, and offered advice to the War Office on what aspects of the defences should be prioritised. As Indian Under-secretary of State John Cross explained to Hartington, Aden's defences should be based on 'the principle that sudden attacks could only be made by comparatively small squadrons; and the defences have been calculated in each case to provide against sudden attack.'¹³⁴ Defending Aden against torpedo boat squadrons or marauding cruisers, probably based in nearby naval stations in the Gulf or the Red Sea, was clearly the aim of the fortifications which were to be built. The most powerful guns to be installed at Aden were the 10-inch breech-loaders, which were some of the

¹³¹ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/62, India Office Records, Notes of a Meeting Held at the War Office, 5 February 1884.

¹³² Bill Clements, 'Barren Rocks – Aden and Ascension Island: Two Volcanic Fortresses 1815-1945', *FORT* 15:14 (2011), 24.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/62, India Office Records, Under-secretary of State for India to the Secretary of State for War, Letter, February 1884.

latest in Britain's military arsenal. But firing a 500-pound shell, they were designed only to deal with small cruisers on distant, colonial stations.¹³⁵ These guns could defend Aden effectively against any of the naval assets deployed by the French or the Italians in the Red Sea. Even 'in the event of a more serious attack being contemplated by any Foreign Power, it could not be kept secret, and the support of the British Fleet might be counted on.'¹³⁶

There was no ambiguity against whom these fortifications were designed to protect Aden. 'Clearly we could only expect attack from France with her base at Obokh or Italy, allied with some other power, with her base at Assab,' wrote one senior officer on the East Indies Station.¹³⁷ 'Aden should be made a large arsenal and store depot, for not only would it be of advantage during peace...but it would be doubly as advantageous in the event of war...guarding, as it does the Red Sea.'¹³⁸ It is therefore perhaps not a coincidence that, although the government had been advised for years that Aden's obsolete defences needed upgrading, these works were authorised in February 1884 when it became clear that nearby ports such as Berbera were in danger of falling to European rivals. The resulting fortifications were designed to protect the base from lightning assaults from short-range, small attack craft.¹³⁹

Moreover, throughout January the government had been receiving intelligence reports on increased French and Italian naval activity in the region. A large French cruiser had been spotted steaming towards Obokh, the heaviest warship of its type yet observed at the station.¹⁴⁰ Baring wrote back to London warning of rumours that the Italians were preparing to deploy troops to

¹³⁵ Roger Chesneau, Eugene Kolesnik, and N.J.M. Campbell, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1860-1905* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1979), 33.

¹³⁶ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/62, India Office Records, Under-secretary of State for India to the Secretary of State for War, Letter, February 1884.

¹³⁷ Commander Arthur Hastings to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, General Letter, 30 April 1885, in Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol 5., 713.

¹³⁸ Commander Arthur Hastings to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, General Letter, 30 April 1885, in Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol 5., 713.

¹³⁹ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/62, India Office Records, India Office to the Colonial Office, letter, February 1884.

¹⁴⁰ British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/20/FO2/3, India Office Records, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Sir Savile Lumley to Earl Granville, letter, 17 January 1884.

Berbera and to raise their flag over the Somali coast.¹⁴¹ The India Office was especially concerned about Italian intentions towards Berbera. John Godley, one of the senior secretaries in the India Office, wrote to Sir Julian Pauncefote, the permanent under-secretary in the Foreign Office and noted expert on the Suez Canal and the Eastern Question, warning him of the consequences to Aden should the Italians take Berbera.¹⁴²

In the midst of these strategic assessments, on 12 February the government finally learned that Sinkat had fallen to Osman Digna. Reports reached London indicating that the remaining members of the garrison had been surrounded and butchered after breaking out of the town in a desperate attempt to reach Suakin.¹⁴³ The Cabinet also received Gordon's reply, affirming that a demonstration of force against Osman Digna would help in his mission to evacuate Sudan.¹⁴⁴ Compelled by 'ill-instructed public opinion,'¹⁴⁵ and by the weight of the strategic arguments which had been put forward by his Cabinet colleagues, Gladstone agreed to unleash a military expedition to Suakin to crush the Hadendowa in revenge for Sinkat and El Teb.

His capitulation was also due in part to difficulties in his personal life. Illness confined him to his bed during this period, and he frequently missed Cabinet meetings. On 18 January 1884, for instance, when Gordon was appointed Governor-General of Egypt and given his instructions from the Cabinet, Gladstone was absent from Whitehall. This was significant, because his absence meant that the anti-imperialists arrayed against the Hartington-Northbrook ring were often outflanked by the pro-interventionists.¹⁴⁶ In addition, as demonstrated by Wolseley and Gordon, military planners wielded considerable influence over the Cabinet when it came to crafting Sudanese policy. The

¹⁴¹ British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/20/FO2/3, India Office Records, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Sir Evelyn Baring to Earl Granville, telegram, 1 January 1884.

¹⁴² British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/20/FO2/3, India Office Records, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, John Godley to Sir Julian Pauncefote, letter, 12 January 1884.

¹⁴³ H.E. Colville, *History of the Sudan Campaign 1884-1885* (1889; reprint, Nashville: Battery Press, 1996), 21.

¹⁴⁴ National Archives, Kew, PRO/30/29/144, Correspondence and Memoranda: Cabinet Opinions, Marquess of Hartington to Lord Northbrook, letter, 14 February 1884.

¹⁴⁵ Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881-1898*, 78.

¹⁴⁶ Morris, *Heaven's Command*, 498.

expedition which was sent to Suakin had been organised and promoted by men who believed there was a strategic imperative to capture the Red Sea ports. Although Gladstone himself was much more sceptical about the use of troops in Eastern Sudan, the Cabinet's collective rationale behind the Red Sea expeditions was fundamentally rooted in imperial security.

And so the order flashed out along the telegraph wire from London to Cairo, 'Force to be collected at Suakim with the object, if possible, of relieving Tokar garrison if it can hold out; if not, of taking any measures necessary for defence of ports.'¹⁴⁷

The Suakin Expeditions

As a result of the advance of Mahdist forces in the east, between 1884 and 1885 the British government despatched two expeditions to Suakin. Militarily-speaking, both deployments were somewhat unremarkable examples of colonial warfare, with several battles fought outside Suakin but without achieving any significant results. The expeditions failed to contain Osman Digna's insurgency against the Egyptian administration, which was effectively extinguished. However, the wider significance of the two expeditions, the first of which arrived in March 1884, was to permanently secure first Suakin, and then other previously Egyptian-owned Red Sea ports, to prevent their harbours.

Indeed, the despatch of troops to Suakin and political decisions, such as the appointment of Vice Admiral Sir William Hewett as Governor of the Red Sea Littoral, clearly signalled Britain's intent to retain Suakin as an exclusive possession. When announcing that troops would be sent to the port in February 1884, Gladstone was forced to deny that the government was imposing a formal

¹⁴⁷ National Archives, Kew, Ad. WO 33/42, War Office Records, Adjutant-General to the General Officer Commanding in Egypt, telegram, 12 February 1884.

protectorate over the Red Sea littoral.¹⁴⁸ Vacillation over Suakin's constitutional status was likely a reflection of the government's inability to reconcile Gladstone's personal aversion towards imperial expansion with the strategic necessity of denying the port to any of Britain's rivals.¹⁴⁹

This mismatch between the government's actions and its rhetoric over the Sudan question was criticised by the Opposition.¹⁵⁰ The government faced questions in Parliament regarding its aims in the campaign, even as it struggled to make up its own mind. Lord George Hamilton, the former Under-secretary of State for India and future First Lord, for example, asked if 'the Government should be prepared to make an intelligible statement of the policy they intend to pursue in Egypt.'¹⁵¹ Hamilton criticised the government for waging a war 'for the purpose of keeping together the debris of the repudiated policy of an impotent foreign Government,'¹⁵² and across the aisle, the Liberal backbencher Henry Labouchère attacked the government for offering a series of different reasons to Parliament for the need to intervene in Suakin.¹⁵³

In fact, Labouchère had picked up on something very significant in the government's response to the crisis. The government's public position on Suakin had evolved since November 1883, from protecting the port from the Mahdists, to rescuing the garrisons in Tokar and Sinkat, to upholding British prestige. As Labouchère exclaimed,

It was understood with regard to that port that we had entered into some general pledge to maintain the independence of Egypt against any attack from the Soudanese, not only in Egypt Proper, but in what were called the ports of the Red Sea. Soon after that, we were told that that was not the only reason operations were undertaken at Suakin, but another object was to prevent that place being used as a port from which to carry slaves across the Red

¹⁴⁸ William Gladstone, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 February 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 284 (1884), 444.

¹⁴⁹ Serels, *Starvation and the State*, 56.

¹⁵⁰ Randolph Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 February 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 284 (1884), 443.

¹⁵¹ Lord George Hamilton, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1054.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 1054-1055.

¹⁵³ Henry Labouchère, Speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1663.

Sea...Later on the holding of Suakin was stated to be necessary in order to prevent the Turks from being attacked in Arabia by the Soudanese. Up to the Vote of Censure it had been a policy of rescue and retire on the part of the Government; but, at that period, the noble Marquess the Secretary of State for War...went further, and declared that, to all intents and purposes, we were now going to establish our own sway in the Eastern Soudan and the ports of the Red Sea – not against the Soudanese, but against Foreign Powers.¹⁵⁴

Not being a member of Cabinet, he was perhaps unaware of the debates which had taken place between the secretaries of state and their advisers, nor was he privy to the intelligence which was gathered on the Mahdists in Sudan and the French and Italians in the Red Sea. But his remarks did highlight the common thread which linked all the government's actions, which intended to secure the ports held safely in the hands of a friendly power, British or Egyptian, and to keep them from rival navies.

To be sure, there were those who supported the government's action in Suakin. As one influential London tabloid explained to its readers, Suakin must be held because of:

the necessity of keeping the coast opposite Aden in the hands of a friendly Power, in order that we may be able to draw the supplies necessary for the supply of our garrison. Add to this the certainty that if Suakin and the Red Sea littoral were abandoned by Egypt they would soon be snapped up by France and Italy; and we have a fairly comprehensive summary of the reasons why an English expedition was despatched to reduce Osman Digna and his clansmen to obedience.¹⁵⁵

Lord Hartington, the War Secretary, told the House 'it is necessary that we should take care that these ports are held by a civilized Power, or a Power under the influence of a civilized Power'¹⁵⁶, to which the former Conservative Colonial Secretary, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, retorted, 'yes...in other

¹⁵⁴ Henry Labouchère, Speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1663.

¹⁵⁵ 'Defence at Suakin – Great Battle at Teb,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 March 1884.

¹⁵⁶ Marquess of Hartington, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1167.

words, either by England, or a Power under the influence of England.¹⁵⁷ Hartington later declared, 'I consider it a matter of importance to British interests that the ports of the Red Sea should not be in a position which would tempt any other European Power to occupy them.'¹⁵⁸ He added, 'we know very well that there are other European Powers which would not be averse to the occupation of the ports on the Red Sea. It appears to me that the importance of the Red Sea, as being on our line of communication with our Indian Possessions, makes it of great importance that no other European Power should be established in any of these ports.'¹⁵⁹

Similarly, Sir George Elliot, the great telegraph tycoon who had advised Disraeli to buy the Suez Canal shares in 1875, rose in the House and announced that 'the safety of that great waterway is indispensable to the interests of this country; and...it is impossible for anyone to have that control over the Suez Canal...unless they were in possession of the littoral of the Red Sea.'¹⁶⁰ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, the Under-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, even defended the government's shifting rationale for intervening in the Red Sea littoral, arguing that 'no doubt, those arguments were different, but they were not inconsistent.'¹⁶¹ Fitzmaurice continued, 'the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are British interests also, because they are the road to British interest. The communication between the Mediterranean and British India was a matter of interest to this country, and would always be so.'¹⁶² This was something even members of the Opposition could agree to. 'It is essential that the British Government should take care that these ports are held either by a civilised Power or by one under the influence of a civilised Power, and that British interests demand that no European

¹⁵⁷ Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1167.

¹⁵⁸ Marquess of Hartington, Speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1149.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Sir George Elliot Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 1075.

¹⁶¹ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884).

¹⁶² Ibid.

Power should have a port on the Red Sea,' declared one Conservative MP during the debate over Suakin's fate.¹⁶³

As the government continued to wrangle over the political aspects of Suakin's occupation, the military men on the spot took matters into their own hands. Hewett was ordered by the government to travel south to Ethiopia to negotiate a settlement with the Emperor Johannes IV to allow the remaining Egyptian garrisons in Equatoria to evacuate through Ethiopian territory to Massawa. In his place, the military command in Egypt appointed Sir Herbert Chermside as interim governor of Suakin. Chermside had served as a military attaché with the Ottoman army in counterinsurgency operations in Serbia as well as against Russian troops during the Russo-Turkish War.¹⁶⁴ He had also served as an intelligence officer during the military intervention in Egypt, and was appointed as a major in the reformed Egyptian army following the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps more importantly, Chermside was an expert in the use of submarine mines for harbour defence, having received training in coastal warfare at Chatham, Portsmouth, and in Devon.¹⁶⁶

Upon replacing Hewett, Chermside slightly altered the command structure in Suakin, forming a new Anglo-Egyptian administration. Although all the significant posts were still occupied by British officers, all of them were officially serving in the Egyptian army.¹⁶⁷ This meant that whilst the port was technically still in the Khedive's hands, it was in reality controlled entirely by the British armed forces. As Chermside and his subordinates were in the service of the Khedive, they could act without any oversight whatsoever from the British government, and the military was free to further British imperial interests in the Eastern Sudan as it alone saw fit. Chermside personally felt that 'if Egypt retained Suakin, despite the loss of Khartoum and Berber, it would be able at least to hammer

¹⁶³ Henry de Worms, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 March 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 285 (1884), 28.

¹⁶⁴ C. V. Owen, 'Chermside, Sir Herbert Charles (1850–1929)', rev. M. G. M. Jones, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32390>, accessed 30 Dec 2015].

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Serels, *Starvation and the State*, 56.

at any force that might endanger her Nile trade. Thus, holding the coastline represented...a chance to recapture part of the interior.'¹⁶⁸ Gladstone was powerless to do anything about the hybrid Anglo-Egyptian regime which was established in Suakin by the military once the campaign ended. This Anglo-Egyptian administration would prove to be a permanent fixture on the Red Sea littoral.

In an attempt to forestall calls for further expansion outside Suakin, in April 1884 Gladstone ordered that the first expeditionary force be withdrawn after having secured the port itself. When challenged by Lord Northbrook over the decision, Gladstone responded that he feared the expedition 'will...be the substitution for an Egyptian domination there for an English domination over the whole or part...[which would be] altogether without foundation in public right.'¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it was widely recognised that the expeditions had essentially annexed Suakin as a British port. In Paris, Gabriel Charmes, one of France's leading naval strategists, wrote an impassioned letter to the influential conservative newspaper, the *Journal des débats*. Viscount Lyons, the British ambassador in Paris, reported to Earl Granville a wave of French anger at the British intervention in Eastern Sudan, and he included Charmes' article in his letter back to the Foreign Office:

After having seized Aden and Perim, and having secured their supremacy over the Suez Canal, the English have got their hands on the ports which leads to all the riches of central Africa. They are not discouraged at the first failure in the pursuit of their goal. Failures become, instead, opportunities for further success. The insurrection of Arabi gave them Egypt; the Mahdist uprising now gives them the Red Sea.¹⁷⁰

An appropriate response for France, Charmes argued, would be to seize a port in the Red Sea for itself. 'While England seizes Suakin, we should go directly to raise our flag over Massowah, a port

¹⁶⁸ Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule*, 193.

¹⁶⁹ William Gladstone to Lord Northbrook, letter, quoted in Gladstone, *The Gladstone Diaries*, 152.

¹⁷⁰ Gabriel Charmes, quoted in, British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Viscount Lyons to Earl Granville, letter, 23 March 1884.

where we have considerable interest, and where we too could fill the role of “a civilized power”, he wrote.¹⁷¹

In fact, although the French Ministry of Marine chose not to launch an amphibious assault against Massawa in response to the Suakin expedition, it did begin to assert its territorial rights at the mouth of the Red Sea more aggressively. When Parliament referred to the French outpost at Obokh as merely a French territorial claim, for example, the French ambassador to London, William Waddington, protested to the Foreign Secretary. ‘As a matter of fact, is not “claimed” by France, it has long been a French *possession*,’¹⁷² Waddington insisted to Granville. An increase in French activity was observed around their base in Obokh, raising concerns in the India Office which suggested to Lord Northbrook that ‘some practical steps should...be taken...to anticipate any possible French activity...south-westwards,’¹⁷³ to head off growth of a possible French colony on the Bab-el-Mandeb strait.

Lyons warned Granville that France was determined to follow Britain’s example by seizing more territory in the Red Sea littoral. As far as the French were concerned, Lyons believed, the strategic balance had been tilted in Britain’s favour, and the occupation of Suakin had provided a justification for reciprocal action over other Red Sea ports. ‘The present business of the French Government,’ wrote Lyons back to London, is ‘to place France...in a position at least equal to that which she formerly held [in the Red Sea]. Your Lordship is aware that great attention is now given here to matters relative to Obokh and Cheikh Said and other points claimed by France at the entrance to the Red Sea, or on the coasts of the sea itself.’¹⁷⁴ For the first time, on orders from the Admiralty, the Royal Navy conducted a proper reconnaissance mission off Obokh to gather intelligence on the port and the naval facilities there. Whilst the development of the station

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Confidential Letter from M. Waddington to Earl of Granville, 5 March 1884.

¹⁷³ Large, ‘The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905’, 6.41.

¹⁷⁴ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Viscount Lyons to Earl Granville, letter, 25 April 1884.

continued to be hampered by the lack of fresh water and a properly protected anchorage, HMS *Arab* reported that a French cruiser had landed troops and claimed a strip of land on the bay extending for several miles westwards.¹⁷⁵ With tensions increasing in the Red Sea and progress stalled at an international conference on Suez Canal navigation dues, Gladstone wrote to a friend that 'the Ministry is rapidly approaching a crisis in a question of foreign affairs which involves principles of the deepest importance not only to the welfare of Egypt...but even the peace of Europe.'¹⁷⁶

With the expedition withdrawn, the government reopened negotiations with Egypt over the fate of Suakin and the other Red Sea ports under Egyptian control. A letter from Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, the British ambassador to Constantinople, indicates that the Foreign Office hoped that Egypt would resume its responsibility for defending the ports.¹⁷⁷ But by late May it was becoming increasingly clear that the bankrupt regime in Cairo was unable to continue the effective occupation of its ports. Granville then suggested that the Porte should assume direct responsibility for the Red Sea littoral, including all the ports now in theory held by the Khedive. 'Her Majesty's Government would be willing to recognise the authority of the Sultan over that part of the coast which is now under Egyptian jurisdiction as far as and including Zeyla, upon condition that the Slave Trade shall be suppressed, and that no part of the territory shall at any time be ceded to any foreign Power,' wrote Granville to Dufferin.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, Granville continued, 'with regard to the coast eastward of Zeyla, it is the intention of Her Majesty's Government on the withdrawal of the Egyptians to make such arrangements as they may think desirable for the preservation of order and the security of British interests, especially at Berbera, from which Aden draws its chief supplies.'¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Commander of HMS *Arab* to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, Proceedings, 19 May 1884, in Anita Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 5 (Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993), 600.

¹⁷⁶ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37, Cabinet Minutes and Papers: Photographic Copies of Cabinet Letters in the Royal Archives, William Gladstone to Leonard Courtney, letter, 16 June 1884.

¹⁷⁷ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/5-11, India Office Records, Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, letter, 14 May 1884.

¹⁷⁸ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, Confidential Letter, 29 May 1884.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

As these negotiations were being conducted in Cairo and Constantinople, British officials attempted as best they could to shore up the Egyptian garrisons in the remaining Red Sea ports which were on the verge of collapse. Chermside agreed to pay Ras Alula, the Ethiopian warlord, an annual bribe of 18,000 piastres to avoid attacking Massawa, until Hewett in early June was able to negotiate a final peace settlement with Johannes IV which formally ended the Ethiopian-Egyptian War.¹⁸⁰ In Suakin itself, although the main British force of 4,000 had been withdrawn, a permanent garrison of 688 troops was left behind, consisting of men from the Royal Marines, the Royal Engineers, and the Royal Mounted Artillery.¹⁸¹ Major-General Arthur Fremantle of the Coldstream Guards was sent out from England to become the commander of the British forces in Suakin, and the Royal Engineers set about transforming it into a fortress. An intelligence report sent back to the Inspector-General of Fortifications in July 1884 reveals that the Engineers began constructing two new piers big enough for coaling and supplying large cruisers. More piers were planned to facilitate the disembarkation of formations of troops, as were an elaborate set of stone fortifications to surround the town.¹⁸² Although the British garrison was not permitted to operate outside of Suakin's immediate neighbourhood, the construction of stone piers and fortifications gave a sense of permanence to Britain's military occupation of the town.

To the south, circumstances forced the British to take more drastic steps. The Egyptians decided to withdraw all of their remaining garrisons on the Somali coast, announcing their intention to abandon their claims to the littoral south of Massawa, including the ports of Berbera and Zeyla. In order to prevent the capture of Berbera by a foreign power, Lord Fitzmaurice told Parliament that the Political Resident at Aden was directed to enter into negotiations with the native Somali chiefs in

¹⁸⁰ D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, 104-106.

¹⁸¹ Surrey History Centre, Woking, LM/COR, Captain W.H. Poe to Major-General Fremantle, Report on the Distribution of British and Egyptian Troops in Garrisons at Suakim, 28 July 1884.

¹⁸² Surrey History Centre, Woking, LM/COR, Major W. Emerson Peck to the Inspector-General of Fortifications, Report, 13 July 1884.

the area to formally place them under British protection.¹⁸³ Berbera was thought to be crucial for Aden's security, as it supplied most of the meat eaten by the British garrison in Aden.¹⁸⁴ The resulting Treaty, signed on 15 July by the local chiefs and by Major Hunter on behalf of the British government, stipulated that the Somali tribes could not sign away any territory to any state except Britain, and that the British government could appoint Agents or Agents to Berbera and the small nearby harbour of Bulhar.¹⁸⁵

To enforce this treaty, Hewett had split the Red Sea Division into two sections, putting three cruisers onto semi-permanent station off the Somali coast.¹⁸⁶ HMS *Arab*, *Woodlark*, and *Sphinx* were ordered to patrol along the shoreline, essentially to show the flag and to prevent other powers from landing troops. In August, they were joined by *Ranger*, which also brought along a complement of Indian troops to garrison Berber and Zeyla.¹⁸⁷ With the capture of the only two deep-water ports, the entire Somali coast was now effectively a British possession, without even the pretence of a joint Anglo-Egyptian condominium. The Somali coast became a protectorate in all but name, and when in October the French took similar steps and claimed Tadjoura, a small port down the coast from Obokh, the Foreign Office retaliated by declaring 'Bulhar and Berbera are [now] under British protection, not independent'.¹⁸⁸

When the Ottoman ambassador in London protested about the occupation of Turkish territory, Granville simply pointed out that 'the Porte has taken no steps to occupy Tajourra and Zeyla, and...it is necessary, on the evacuation of the coast by the Egyptians, to take steps for the

¹⁸³ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 July 1884, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 290 (1884), 1418.

¹⁸⁴ E.H.M. Clifford, 'The British Somaliland-Ethiopia Boundary,' *The Geographical Journal*, 87 (1936): 289.

¹⁸⁵ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Major Hunter to the Earl of Kimberley, letter, 15 July 1884.

¹⁸⁶ William Hewett to the Secretary of the Admiralty, General Letter, 6 April 1884, in Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 5, 562.

¹⁸⁷ Large, 'The Extension of British Influence in and around the Gulf of Aden, 1865-1905', 6.59.

¹⁸⁸ Foreign Office, October 1884, quoted in *ibid.*, 6.69.

maintenance of order on that part of the coast.¹⁸⁹ The British simply could not allow other powers to fill the vacuum left by the departing Egyptians on so vital a stretch of coastline. Moreover, once the British had taken the coast, JD Fullerton, a noted explorer and officer in the Royal Engineers, was sent out from Aden to map the Somaliland interior. His report not only included detailed maps, but also genealogies of elders, the state of livestock, local features and oases – in short, everything needed to establish military and civilian control over the area.¹⁹⁰ These types of intelligence-gathering operations prepared the way for the formal annexation of territory in the hinterland interior, and in the case of Somaliland, came after the coasts were seized.

The British also kept a wary eye on Massawa. Although the Egyptians had not announced the abandonment of the port and the war with Ethiopia had come to a close, Egypt's hold over the port was extremely shaky. The British Agent in Massawa, Captain Tristan Speedy, wrote to the commodore of the Red Sea Division imploring for assistance. According to Speedy, the remaining garrison consisted only of 100 Egyptian soldiers and 100 Bashi Bashouk irregulars and was extremely unreliable, possibly even at risk of defecting to the Mahdists who were rumoured to be advancing on the port.¹⁹¹ 'To prevent [the port from falling] the immediate presence of one man of war at least is imperatively required, and two companies of marines...so serious do I consider the state of Massowah, that I have telegraphed Lord John Hay,'¹⁹² wrote Speedy.

And the British were not the only ones who had noticed the situation in Massawa. The Italians, confined as they were to their small settlement at Assab Bay, were looking keenly for any chance to acquire a proper port from which they could establish a colony and naval base. This agenda was being pushed very strongly by the Foreign Minister Pasquale Mancini, who looked to

¹⁸⁹ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Earl Granville to Musurus Pasha, letter, 22 August 1884.

¹⁹⁰ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Political Resident Aden to the Secretary to the Government of Bombay, Confidential Report, 27 December 1884.

¹⁹¹ Surrey History Centre, Woking, LM/COR, Captain Tristan C.S. Speedy to Commodore Robert Molyneux, letter, 23 September 1884.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, Lord John Hay was the current Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet at the time this letter was written.

buttress Italy's claim to be a Great Power by acquiring colonies – the trappings of imperial greatness.

'The Red Sea is the key to the Mediterranean,'¹⁹³ he declared in Parliament, and the Italian ambassador in London was instructed to lobby Britain to support Italy's imperial ambitions in the Red Sea. Count Nigra, the Italian ambassador, duly approached Granville with a proposal for an Italian occupation of either Zeyla or Massawa. Nigra argued that 'it seems to us that an occupation [of Massawa] by a Power other than Italy would not be consistent with the British interests,' and pointed out that the existing Italian settlement at Assab with its meagre port facilities hardly represented a threat to British imperial interests.¹⁹⁴

Granville refused to cede Zeyla to the Italians, but he was open to the possibility of turning Massawa over to them. 'Her Majesty's Government, for their part, have no objection to an Italian occupation of...Massowah,' he assured Nigra in December 1884.¹⁹⁵ As Ramm noted in her assessment of the expansion of Italian power in the Red Sea, a takeover of Massawa by Italy was actually consistent with British interests, which at this time was concerned with introducing a counterbalance to the French presence in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.¹⁹⁶ Italy at this point was still one of the weakest of the European powers, although a useful ally following the French annexation of Tunis, and the modest Regina Marina was outnumbered by the British Mediterranean Fleet alone.¹⁹⁷ The main Italian battlefleet was incapable of even defending the Italian heartland, and without a suitable force of cruisers or commerce raiders, the Italians could not pose any real threat to British shipping through the Red Sea.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the British had secretly discovered that

¹⁹³ P.S. Mancini, quoted in Giampaolo Novati, 'Italy in the Triangle of the Horn: Too Many Corners for Half a Power,' *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32 (1994), 369.

¹⁹⁴ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, M. Mancini to Count Nigra, letter, 29 October 1884.

¹⁹⁵ GF Fairholme, 'Memorandum on Italian Requests for Cession of Zeyla, and for Permission to land Troops there,' 3 July 1903, in Steven Smith, ed., *The Red Sea Region: Sovereignty, Boundaries & Conflict, 1839-1967*, vol. 1. Arabian Geopolitics 6 Regional Documentary Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁹⁶ Ramm, 'Great Britain and the Planting of Italian Power in the Red Sea, 1868 – 1885', 215.

¹⁹⁷ John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 230.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Massawa was running an annual deficit of £20,000.¹⁹⁹ Even keeping the port operational would be a major challenge for the Italians, who were already struggling to find the resources to match Mancini's grand imperial vision.

Therefore, if the Egyptians were unable to hold Massawa, it would be better for the Italians to take it over rather than either the French or the Mahdists. Italy was hardly a strategic rival, and, as an added bonus, she was hostile towards the French. Although Baring and some members of the Cabinet were extremely concerned about French, or possibly even German, encroachment on the Red Sea coast,²⁰⁰ the Italians would be a useful proxy through which to secure the port from more powerful imperial navies.

As for Eastern Sudan, work continued on the fortifications, and the commander of the Royal Navy's Red Sea Division suggested a novel strategy for pacifying the coastal area. In October 1884, on the suggestion of Commodore Robert Molyneux, the Cabinet decided to try and bring the Hadendowa to heel by cutting off imports of food into the region and creating food scarcity which, it was hoped, would force them to come to terms with the government in Suakin.²⁰¹ Molyneux proposed that Royal Navy cruisers currently protecting Suakin should also intercept grain shipments being sent across the Red Sea from Arabia.²⁰² The military officials in Suakin were particularly enthusiastic about this plan, because they were eager to adopt a more offensive posture and were currently not permitted to march outside of Suakin's walls.

Moreover, the withdrawal of troops from Suakin in April 1884 would prove to be temporary. In response to demands to rescue Gordon, sent as the last Governor-General of Sudan to oversee the evacuation of the Egyptian government from Khartoum before becoming trapped inside the capital, in November 1884 Gladstone reluctantly authorised a relief expedition to march up the Nile

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Abacus, 1991), 971.

²⁰⁰ Sanderson, *England, Europe & the Upper Nile*, 18.

²⁰¹ Serels, *Starvation and the State*, 46.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

from Egypt. Hartington was quick to telegraph Wolseley, the expedition's commander, asking to confirm whether or not an expedition should be sent to Eastern Sudan to secure the expedition's flank and to open the Suakin-Berber road for a possible withdrawal route.²⁰³ He also repeatedly called for the immediate despatch of another imperial field force to Suakin, claiming to the Prime Minister that Wolseley deemed this necessary for his Nile relief column. On 10 January, for example, Gladstone replied to Hartington that it seemed 'rather difficult to refuse [Wolseley] altogether what he asks.'²⁰⁴ By 14 January he agreed to the request, albeit with a great deal of reluctance. But, Gladstone added to Hartington, 'Another dictum of his [Wolseley's], about keeping Suakim for some years, I do not [agree]: and I hope that if a battalion goes to that place, it will be so sent as in no way to fetter the Cabinet with reference to ulterior occupation.'²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, it is perhaps not a coincidence that a meeting of the Cabinet was held on 20 January to discuss the strategic situation with France and Italy and possible establishment of more British protectorates in Africa.²⁰⁶

In fact, a closer examination of the sources suggests that Hartington, Northbrook, and Clarke were largely responsible for crafting the plans for a second expedition to Suakin, and for different reasons than the ones offered by Gladstone. Interestingly, Wolseley himself was not actually in favour of a second expedition to Suakin, despite what Hartington told the Prime Minister, and he was astonished when he learned another force was being sent to the port.²⁰⁷ In his personal diary, the day after receiving Hartington's telegram, he wrote:

Hartington winds up his telegram by asking if I wished him to send this force to Suakim for the purpose of helping me, and that a force sent there to crush Osman Digma would go far towards pacifying Eastern Soudan. The tone & tendency of his recent official telegrams has been to try and force me to say that this Suakim expedition would at least materially help me if I would not go so far as to say I actually thought it essential to my success, which they

²⁰³ British Library, CM/IOR/026, India Office Records, Lord Hartington to Sir Garnet Wolseley, telegram, 7 January 1885.

²⁰⁴ William Gladstone to Lord Hartington, letter, 10 January 1885, *The Gladstone Diaries*, 274.

²⁰⁵ William Gladstone to Lord Hartington, 14 January 1885, *The Gladstone Diaries*, 275.

²⁰⁶ Diary Entry, 20 January 1885, *The Gladstone Diaries*, 275.

²⁰⁷ Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 265.

evidently thought they might induce me to say...There is somebody frightening the Govt. about my expedition, & I cannot but think that Andrew Clarke, who does not understand the first elements of the science of war, has got hold of those who influence the *Pall Mall Gazette*.²⁰⁸

In fact, Wolseley made it clear in his diary that he opposed British involvement in Sudan in the first place, as he believed firmly that the Cape route alone was sufficient for British imperial security. 'As I have over and over told our Authorities, the Cape of Good Hope is a much more important place to us than Egypt. I argued this out with Northbrook last year, but he would not have my arguments. If you want to control the Suez Canal – the control of which I don't care much about if we hold the Cape strongly – you can do so from Cyprus,'²⁰⁹ he noted a few weeks after being informed about the second expedition.

The official narrative put forth by the government that the second Suakin operation was launched as a flanking manoeuvre to support the Gordon Relief Column continues to be reiterated in the limited number of works on the Sudanese campaigns.²¹⁰ However, given Hartington's and Northbrook's personal commitment to imperial defence and the role played by the Admiralty and the War Office in organising the Suakin expeditions, it would appear more likely that they were instead intended as a means of annexing the port. Both men had consistently argued for the seizure of all Egyptian ports in the region following the collapse of Ismail's empire. Exchanges between Gladstone and Hartington, and comments made by both the War Secretary and the First Lord in Cabinet show a persistent call to take action whenever the Egyptian ports were threatened for the purpose of imperial security. Gladstone's sudden enthusiasm for a second expedition and a strategic railway line may well have been sincere, if unexpected, but he was being advised by senior ministers

²⁰⁸ Sir Garnet Wolseley, *In Relief of Gordon: Lord Wolseley's Campaign Journal of the Khartoum Relief Expedition 1884-1885*, ed. Adrian Preston (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967), 109-110.

²⁰⁹ Diary Entry, 24 February 1885, *In Relief of Gordon*, 153-4.

²¹⁰ Metcalfe, *Imperial Connections*, 89.

who clearly believed that upholding British naval supremacy in the Red Sea was a paramount concern.

As the force of British, Indian, and Australian troops was being mustered and shipped to Suakin in February, several key changes occurred in Eastern Sudan. Firstly, Tokar, captured by Graham a year earlier, was re-occupied by Mahdist forces and turned into Osman's principal forward operating base.²¹¹ Several victories over the Ethiopians in a series of skirmishes raised the worrying possibility that the Mahdists could march south towards Massawa and capture the port from the small Egyptian garrison. The losses which he had sustained as a result of the first expedition meant that Osman was no longer in a position to seriously invest Suakin, but Massawa was a more realistic target.²¹² So it was perhaps with a sense of relief for the British that the Italians followed up on the discussions held in London in December 1884 and sent six warships and a battalion of light troops to raise the Italian flag at Massawa in February 1885. HMS *Condor* was ordered to observe the landings, and despite Egyptian protests, its commander was informed that, 'you may consider that the Italians have some secret understanding with the British and Egyptian Governments to justify their act.'²¹³ Once ensconced in the town, the Italians promptly hauled down the Egyptian flag and claimed the entire Red Sea coastline down to Assab in the south. Earl Granville assured the Italian ambassador that Britain was 'prepared to welcome,' such a move because it meant that Britain could rest assured knowing that the coastline was safe from both the Mahdists and the French without having to pay for such security itself.²¹⁴

Moreover, the fortifications recently finished by the Royal Engineers at Suakin ensured that the town had become a small fortress. A map produced by officers of the survey vessel HMS *Myrmidon* reveals that, going far beyond the earthworks thrown up by the troops during the first

²¹¹ D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, 107.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Surrey History Centre, Woking, LM/COR, Commodore Robert Molyneux to Commander William Domville, Memorandum, 1 February 1885.

²¹⁴ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Earl Granville to Sir J.S. Lumley, letter, 5 November 1885.

expedition, Suakin was now surrounded by stone walls.²¹⁵ The port was protected by two batteries, eight forts, and four separate redoubts, complete with a moat and dry ditches guarding the approach to the ramparts.²¹⁶ On these emplacements were mounted 32 pounder naval guns, and they were surrounded by rifle trenches and wire-activated landmines.²¹⁷ Additionally, the engineers had constructed a trestle bridge from the new piers and laid a narrow-gage railway along the inside perimeter of the walls.²¹⁸ Ammunition unloaded from supply ships could be carried directly from the docks to the magazines underneath the guns, ensuring that the port was impregnable to native attacks.²¹⁹ Embodying the overwhelming technological superiority which Europe wielded over the unindustrialised world in the late nineteenth-century, Suakin's defenders could quickly annihilate any approaching Mahdists, armed mostly with spears and muskets, with a barrage of exploding shells and rifle fire.

Clearly, these defences had been constructed to protect Suakin against the Mahdists alone, and no attempt was made to sow naval mines in the harbour or to install coastal guns, as was done in Aden.²²⁰ The fact is, the Mahdists were the only active threat to Suakin, and simply keeping the port out of French hands was the key British objective. No power would start a hegemonic war over such a remote station, particularly given the weakness of France, Italy, and Russia during this time and in this area. But in contrast to temporary earthworks, the stone fortifications built around Suakin also had a psychological purpose. They gave the British presence in the port a sense of permanence, a signal to natives and to foreign interlopers that it would remain in British hands.

²¹⁵ National Archives, Kew, FO 925/2974, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Survey of Suakin and the Defences by Officers of Myrmidon, map, 1884.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Daniel Rhodes, 'The Nineteenth-Century Colonial Archaeology of Suakin, Sudan,' *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15 (2010), 167.

²²⁰ National Archives, Kew, FO 925/2974, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Survey of Suakin and the Defences by Officers of Myrmidon, map, 1884.

Into this fortress were landed 10,000 troops of the second Suakin expedition in March 1885. The second campaign would prove to be a disappointment, and Graham's lacklustre performance drew severe criticism from Wolseley, who vowed never to employ him again.²²¹ By May, having achieved little, both Graham and Wolseley were ordered to retire from the field. After spending over two million pounds,²²² the British had almost nothing to show for it in Eastern Sudan, and the situation outside Suakin's walls remained virtually unchanged.

The reason that the expedition was finally recalled, however, was because of a much more serious crisis on the Indian frontier, in Afghanistan, where in May Russian forces had advanced to the town of Penjdeh. Emboldened by perceived British defeats in Sudan, the hawks in the Russian court urged the Emperor to authorise an incursion into Afghanistan towards the city of Herat as part of the general policy of expansionism in central Asia which had been followed since the 1860s. The move set off alarm bells in Britain, and the Indian High Command scrambled to mobilise all forces on the subcontinent and prepared a column to advance on Herat.²²³ 'The imperatives of high policy, military weakness and common sense alike demanded that Indian defence be given pre-eminence over military vengeance in the Sudan,'²²⁴ explained one of Wolseley's biographers. In London, Gladstone requested a vote of credit for 11 million pounds from Parliament, and Hartington ordered Wolseley to withdraw down the Nile to Egypt and for Graham to pull his forces back to Suakin in preparation for transportation to India. 'Only possible immediate military operations would be on an Indian frontier, for which Indian Government calls for reinforcements,'²²⁵ wired Hartington. So

²²¹ Lunt, 'Graham, Sir Gerald (1831-1899)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²²² 'The Suakin Expeditions', in E.D. Price, ed. *Hazell's Annual Cyclopaedia*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886).

²²³ Wolseley, *In Relief of Gordon*, xlii.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ British Library, London, CM/IOR/026, India Office Records, Telegram from Lord Hartington to Sir Garnet Wolseley, 23 May 1885.

serious did the crisis become, that at one point the government even began printing out official copies of the declaration of war which were to be delivered to all the embassies in London.²²⁶

Thus, the government decided to temporarily shelve its plans for a full reconquest of Sudan in light of the more pressing situation in India, and the second expedition was withdrawn from Suakin. However, the expeditions had served their true purpose, and all of Egypt's former ports in the region were left with British or Anglo-Egyptian administrations and imperial garrisons. Massawa, the last remaining port under Egyptian control was given to the Italians with full British acquiescence. The collapse of Egyptian power and the need to prevent other powers from taking the ports had led directly to the occupation and administration of coastal territory. From London's perspective, British naval paramountcy in the Red Sea had been preserved. Hinterland territory surrounding Suakin and Massawa could be held by the Mahdists and the Ethiopians, who whilst strong enough to defend themselves from small European expeditionary armies, were still weak enough to ensure they posed no real threat to the ports. At this stage the Sudanese interior was unimportant to Britain's oceanic strategy.²²⁷

Instability in the Wake of the Collapse of the Egyptian Colonial Empire

As previously discussed, the historian GN Sanderson introduced his theory of competitive instability in his chapter 'European Imperialism and the Partition of Africa.' Sanderson was an expert on imperial history in sub-Saharan Africa,²²⁸ and his work highlighted the spread of instability throughout Africa as established states and empires of the continent collapsed during the nineteenth century. This implosion of the old order, Sanderson argued, set the stage for European

²²⁶ Rose Louise Greaves, *Persia and the Defence of India 1884-1892: a Study in the Foreign Policy of the Third Marquis of Salisbury* (London: Athlone Press, 1959), 72.

²²⁷ Sanderson, *England, Europe & the Upper Nile*, 24.

²²⁸ After serving in Egypt during the Second World War, Sanderson was appointed Professor of History and Director of the Sudan Research Unit at the University of Khartoum, before returning to teach at the University of London.

intervention into the continental interior. Whilst in previous centuries, the European powers faced large and influential polities in Africa, the collapse of several of these native empires led to the formation of power vacuums and the spread of political instability. Sanderson persuasively demonstrated that in several cases, European expansion into African continent came as a result of efforts to re-stabilise the African 'system' which was undergoing an internal crisis.²²⁹

The annexation of coastlines to restore stability, Sanderson argued, led to disputes over the control of hinterlands. With the principle of effective occupation established at the 1884 Berlin Conference, and in the absence of any powerful native states capable of resisting the Europeans, 'nothing short of the total partition of the Continent could now re-create a comparatively stable system in Africa,'²³⁰ wrote Sanderson.

Sanderson's competitive instability hypothesis is a useful way of looking at the crisis which gripped the Red Sea region in the wake of the Egyptian withdrawal from Sudan and Somaliland. During the 1870s Britain had relied upon Egypt to secure the coasts, and now faced with the possibility of European rivals rushing to grab the ports left behind by the Egyptians, the government felt compelled to start pre-emptively laying claims to ports and territory. In fact, this pattern was repeated elsewhere in Africa at the same time. Sir Donald Currie, for example, the owner of the Castle shipping line, when asked for his opinion on the question of Zululand, wrote back to London saying '[it is] urgently desirable and necessary to extend authority up to the Portuguese frontier, to prevent action of [a] foreign Power.'²³¹ Stationing ships off the coast of the continent was no longer enough to secure paramountcy, the seizure of ports, and then of territory surrounding them, became the strategic priority in Africa.

²²⁹ G.N. Sanderson, 'The European Partition of Africa: Coincidence or Conjuncture?', in E.F. Penrose, *European Imperialism and the Partition of Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1975), 32.

²³⁰ Ibid., 32.

²³¹ British Library, London, IOR/MSS Eur/D604/62, India Office Records, Sir Donald Currie to the Earl of Derby, letter, 6 January 1885.

Churchill, in his history of the Sudanese campaigns, would later dismiss the Suakin expeditions, writing that 'as [the Government] fought without reason, so they conquered without profit.'²³² However, both he and other contemporaries who viewed the expeditions as pointless missed the wider significance of the campaign in the east. By sending troops to the Eastern Sudan, Britain secured Berbera, Suakin, and Zeyla at the expense of France, and successfully installed a weak but convenient Italian government in Massawa. Whilst the expeditions were distasteful to some in Whitehall, they satisfied a key British strategic objective, which was to ensure that no maritime rival could establish a base of operations to threaten the navy's hold over the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Hence, when it appeared that Gladstone would move to hand Suakin and Massawa over to the Ottomans, Sir Andrew Clarke, the Inspector-General of Fortifications and one of the architects of Britain's global defence strategy, appealed directly to Hartington emphasising Suakin's importance to imperial strategic interests and noting that even the Prince of Wales was 'strongly in favour' of holding onto Suakin.²³³

Creation of British Somaliland

In June, in part due to the repeated disasters suffered under Gladstone's premiership, the Liberal government collapsed and Lord Salisbury was invited to form a new government. Salisbury was aware that whilst Suakin and Massawa were in friendly hands, the former Egyptian ports on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden were only lightly held by Indian garrisons. With the exception of Major Hunter's expedition, not much was known of the Somali interior, as evidenced by the scanty official maps of the region, nor about the coastal tribes with whom Hunter had signed treaties of

²³² Churchill, *The River War*, 32.

²³³ National Archives, Kew, WO 28/374, War Office Records: Nile and Suakin Expeditions, Sir Andrew Clarke to the Secretary of State for War, 4 November 1884.

protection the previous year. Britain's control over the Somali coast was therefore somewhat tenuous.

Beginning in August, Salisbury's government became aware that French officials were actively trying to expand French influence at the mouth of the Red Sea by claiming territory in the neighbourhood of their settlement at Obokh. On 24 August, the British Consul for the Somali Coast received an intelligence report from the Vice-Consul in Zeyla informing him that the French Vice-Consul was attempting to claim all the territory surrounding the Gulf of Tadjoura, including the harbour at Djibouti.²³⁴ This seriously rattled the Foreign Office, and the ambassador in Paris informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that 'under the circumstances, the action of the French Vice-Consul is considered to be inconsistent with the tenor of the communications which had passed between the two Governments, and Her Majesty's Government therefore expresses a hope that he would be instructed to withdraw the present claim.'²³⁵ Just in case the French were tempted to attack Zeyla, HMS *Mariner* and HMS *Sphinx* were stationed in the harbour,²³⁶ and the garrison was authorised to resist any incursion with force.²³⁷

Formal negotiations were opened with the French over the question of the Somali coast. Salisbury, for his part, was prepared to recognise French suzerainty over the Gulf of Tadjoura, provided that Zeyla and Berbera remained in British hands. An informal arrangement was worked out with the French for a provisional border between British and French coastal territory.²³⁸ Meanwhile, Major Hunter was sent once again into Somaliland, this time armed with a sheaf of pre-written treaties of protection. Voyaging into the interior, his mission was to extend Britain's legal

²³⁴ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Captain A.B. Mein to Captain C.W.M. Sealy, letter, 24 August 1885.

²³⁵ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Memorandum of Conversation with M. De Freycinet at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 1st October, 3 October 1885.

²³⁶ British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/20/FO/1-11, India Office Records, Foreign Office Prints: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Marquess of Salisbury to Sir J. Walsham, letter, 3 October 1885.

²³⁷ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Lord Harris to Sir Julian Pauncefote, letter, 2 October 1885.

²³⁸ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Major Hunter to the Somali Coast Consulate, 29 October 1885.

basis for establishing a protectorate which stretched inland from the coast.²³⁹ The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that the growing French protectorate at Tadjoura could not outflank the British position along the shoreline. Although a full protectorate over Somaliland was not officially announced until three years later, competition with France and Hunter's mission into Somaliland laid the basis for the expansion of British power from the coast into Somaliland proper.

In fact, these efforts were part of a similar policy which was being urged by the Indian Government on the north shore of the Gulf of Aden. Outside of Aden, Hunter was also persuading native chiefs along the Hadramaut coast to sign treaties accepting British protection. As Hunter explained to the Political Resident, 'it has been our policy to exclude the Turks from the Hadramaut Coast, and that it seems clear that the intrusion of other foreign Powers might also be very inconvenient.'²⁴⁰ He continued, 'I venture to think that in order to insure observance of the agreements by the Chiefs, and respect the integrity of their territories by a foreign Power, the protection to be afforded by us to the Chiefs should not be left an open question, but be binding on us, at least as regards aggression by sea.'²⁴¹ Hunter believed, for the sake of Indian imperial security, it was necessary to do so,²⁴² and there is every reason to believe that his actions across the gulf in Somaliland were motivated by precisely the same reason.

²³⁹ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, India Office Records, Under-secretary of State for India to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 2 October 1885.

²⁴⁰ Major Hunter to General Schneider, letter, 1885, in *The Red Sea Region: Sovereignty, Boundaries and Conflict, 1839-1967* vol. 1 1839-1892, Steven Smith, ed., Arabian Geopolitics 6 Regional Documentary Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 249.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 250.

²⁴² Ibid.

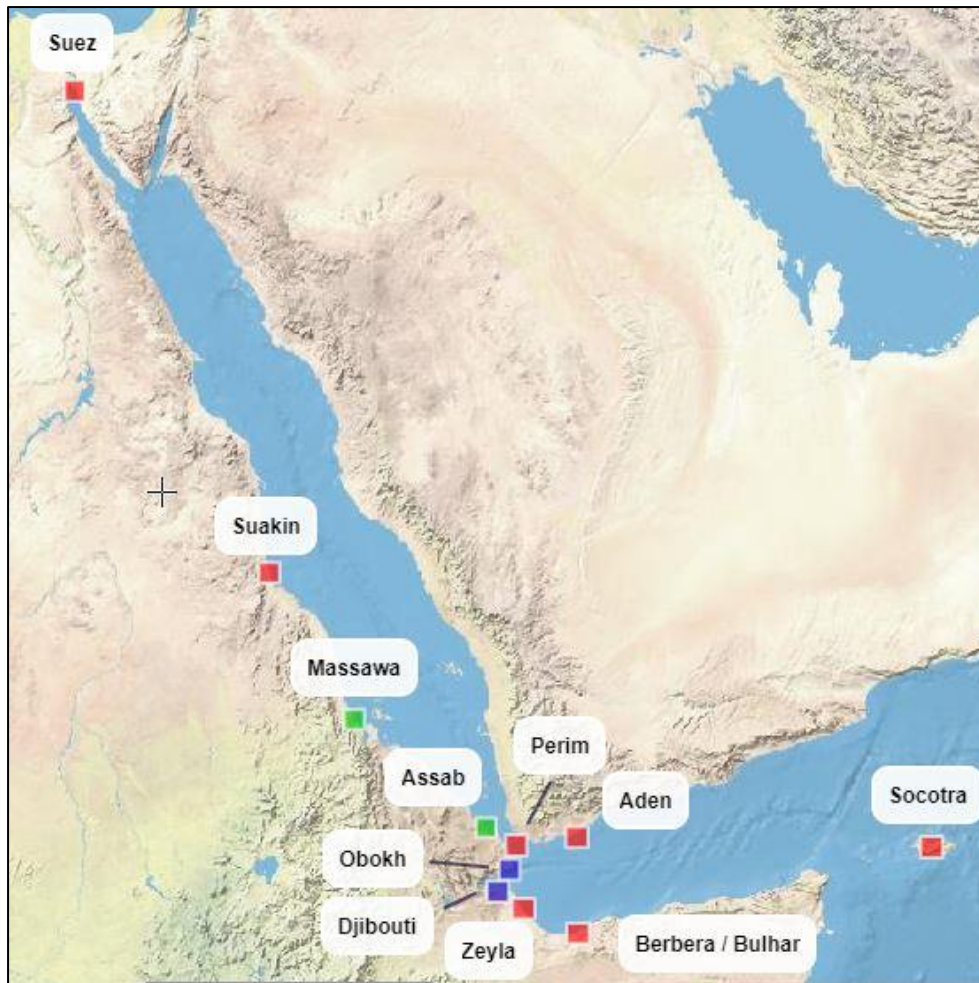


Figure 7: Claims made by the imperial powers; Italy (green), France (blue), and Britain (red)

Ports by Ownership [map], 2018. Scale undetermined; generated by James Fargher; using "ScribbleMaps".

The Indian Government fully supported Hunter's actions, and suggested that these treaties of protection should be turned into a formal protectorate, 'from Sheikh Saiyid to the frontiers of Oman, thus excluding all chance of foreign interference in the neighbourhood of Aden, or between Aden and Muscat.'²⁴³ Gladstone, returned to office in the December 1885 election, expressed 'every imaginable objection to the proposed Protectorate.'²⁴⁴ But the Prime Minister was distracted by issues at home. An alliance with the Irish Nationalists and a commitment to Home Rule meant the government was focused on the Irish question, as well as a split in the Liberal party itself as a result

²⁴³ Sir E. Hertslet, Memorandum on the Turkish Claim of Sovereignty over the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the whole of Arabia, and on the Egyptian Claim to the whole of the Western Shore of the Same Sea, including the African Coast from Suez to Cape Guardafui, in Smith, *The Red Sea Region*, vol. 1, 239.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

of this decision. The Liberal Unionists, led by Hartington, left the Gladstonian Liberals in the ensuing acrimony over Irish Home Rule, triggering another General Election in 1886 which returned Salisbury to office once again.

It is worth noting Mahajan's assessment of the evolution in British foreign policy under Salisbury during this time. Linking the Conservative electoral victory in 1874 with a seismic shift in official and public attitudes towards imperialism and the Empire, Mahajan concluded that Salisbury, who was installed in the India Office after the election, quickly came under the influence of the 'Forward' school of the old India hands. These men, including Sir Bartle Frere and his ring based in the India Office, persuaded Salisbury that 'that the position of the British in India was "singularly unsuited, for purely defensive strategy"'.²⁴⁵ If true, this assessment would go some way to explaining Salisbury's willingness to take decisive action to block French expansion in Somaliland (and later in Sudan). Unable to dislodge the French entirely from their base in the Gulf of Tadjoura, Salisbury could at least prevent them from taking either Berbera or Zeyla, the two significant harbours along the coast.

Meanwhile, the men on the spot continued to sign treaties with the native tribes in the Hadramaut, turning all of southern Arabia into what became essentially a British protectorate. HMS *Dragon* was dispatched by Commander-in-Chief East Indies station to Socotra, for example, 'with a view of establishing a British protectorate'.²⁴⁶ Like the tribes surrounding Aden, Socotra was already a protected state, and the difference between a protected state and protectorate was merely an academic question. In practice, it only meant that the local Sultan was no longer allowed even to correspond with foreign Powers without British permission, and that his dominion was now under

²⁴⁵ Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy, 1874 – 1914*, 51.

²⁴⁶ Captain Charles Anson to Commander-in-Chief East Indies, Letter of Proceedings, in Burdett, *The Persian Gulf & Red Sea Naval Reports*, vol. 6, 73.

the formal control of the Foreign Office. He was duly presented with a Union Flag, and he was instructed to fly it whenever foreign ships cruised by.²⁴⁷

Conclusion

Egypt's imperial overreach in the Red Sea region, its war with Ethiopia, and the subsequent Mahdist rebellion led to the downfall of its short-lived African empire. Compelled by a string of defeats in the Upper Nile Valley and in the Ethiopian highlands which destroyed its military power and by pressure from the British government, Egypt relinquished its control of Sudan. However, whilst Gladstone was eager to see the Egyptians let go of Sudan, a group of navalists and imperialists succeeded in seizing almost every one of Egypt's Red Sea ports. This group, led by Hartington, a man who believed in a 'patriotic defence policy [that] would promote Britain's international greatness',²⁴⁸ and Lord Northbrook, First Lord and ex-Viceroy, ensured that none of the Egyptian ports were acquired by France, Britain's principal maritime rival. They, and the military men on the spot, reacted to the instability and confusion which followed the breakdown of the Egyptian empire by making sure that the imperial defence line between Malta and Bombay remained intact. Ports became *de facto* British possessions, and even in Suakin, governed since 1884 by British officers nominally in Egyptian employ, visitors reported seeing the Union Flag fluttering alone above the main gate and pounds sterling being used for all official business.²⁴⁹

The acquisition of these ports was done to prevent them from falling to hostile foreign powers, and they then subsequently became the starting-points for the expansion of influence into the interior. Legal complications surrounding Egyptian and Ottoman claims to the Red Sea littoral in

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Jonathan Parry, 'Cavendish, Spencer Compton, Marquess of Hartington and eighth duke of Devonshire (1833–1908)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, accessed 5 Jan 2014].

²⁴⁹ Caird Library and Archives, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, WEL/38, Wellcome papers, Journal of Travels in Egypt and Sudan, 1886-1896, diary, 1886.

Sudan meant that the British-controlled administration in Suakin was limited to imposing a grain blockade in the hopes of forcing the import-reliant tribes in Eastern Sudan into dependency on the government. Outside Aden and the Somali ports, however, British officials were sent out to lay the basis for imperial expansion by putting tribes under protection and gathering intelligence on local areas. Copies of the orders and official memoranda which prompted these missions demonstrate clearly that they were done in order to prevent other European powers from gaining an advantage over British positions along the coast.

At this stage, competition to secure positions in the Red Sea region was limited to the coastlines, to grab the best slices of shoreline territory in the wake of the departing Egyptians. The following chapter will discuss the active jockeying between the Europeans which took place once coastal bases were established, each attempting to protect its gains and to limit the influence of its neighbours. This process would begin with modest advances and attempts to purchase the loyalty with local tribes. As the end of the century approached, growing competition led to increasingly large commitments, and petty skirmishes over small villages and native groups were exacerbated into sweeping territorial annexations of whole regions. The replacement of the Egyptians by Europeans in the Red Sea heralded the beginning of the end of the independent polities of northeastern Africa.

Chapter V

Introduction

This final chapter will address British imperial expansion into East Africa and Sudan between 1886 and 1899. Over the course of this period, Britain acquired protectorates over East Africa (Kenya), and in 1896 began the methodical reconquest of Sudan from the Mahdists. As a result, by 1899 British rule had been extended in an arc of territory from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean following the course of the Nile to the Great Lakes. Though technically ruled as a joint condominium with Egypt, Sudan effectively became another protectorate within the British Empire.

This period is also one of the most heavily scrutinised chapters in imperial history, and historians who have examined British imperialism in East Africa include AJP Taylor, Robinson and Gallagher, Daly and Holt, and more recently Thomas Pakenham and Jonas Fossli Gjersø. Their works have analysed the expansion of the Empire into East Africa from a wide range of perspectives including domestic policy, Anglo-German diplomacy, security of the Nile, and even political ecology. The aim of this chapter is not necessarily to challenge or to dismiss their explanations, but rather simply to add to the discussion by focusing on the naval-strategic aspect of imperialism in the region. Concerns over imperial defence played a role in persuading the government to extend British rule over the continental interior of northeastern Africa, beginning at ports identified as potential naval bases.

The archival evidence indicates that members of the Cabinet as well as men on the spot such as Sir William Mackinnon were concerned that unless Britain seized the principal ports along the east coast of Africa, it could be outmanoeuvred by its European rivals. If Britain did not control the region's deepest harbours, or the adjacent territory necessary to secure them, France or Germany might. The construction of French or German naval bases in East Africa would inevitably increase the

risk to or the cost of maintaining Britain's virtual monopoly over transport, trade, and communications in the Indian Ocean during wartime.

These concerns were by no means the only motives behind the scramble for territory, but they nevertheless played a role in influencing the government to engage in or to support the annexation of African territory. The collapse of the Egyptian colonial empire gave Britain the initial opportunity to establish a permanent military presence along the coast in the 1880s, and that control was gradually extended into the interior, at least in part as a way of securing these naval exclaves. By the turn of the century, Britain had successfully safeguarded its status as the paramount imperial and naval power in the western Indian Ocean by securing the vital ship and cable route between India and the Cape of Good Hope.

This chapter will proceed by sections, analysing first the expansion of British control over the interior of Somaliland, then over present-day Kenya through the Imperial British East Africa Company, and finally, the reconquest of Sudan carried out by Kitchener between 1896. A clear naval-strategic motivation can be identified behind the decision to annex each territory in East Africa, and considerations over imperial defence played some role in persuading the British government to extend imperial rule over the East African interior.

Somaliland

As discussed in Chapter IV, the Egyptian colonial crisis in 1884 precipitated the evacuation of the khedive's garrisons from Berbera and Zeyla, the two harbours on the Somali coast. Khedive Ismail's grand design to control the new Suez route by claiming every port and stretch of African coastline to the Indian Ocean had ended in failure. Overstretched and controlled by British political 'advisers', Ismail's successor Tewfik was compelled to abandon his father's empire and to recall his remaining garrisons scattered across in Sudan and Somaliland.

The Egyptian garrisons in Somaliland were replaced by detachments of Indian troops, at first sent with the intention of temporarily stabilising the area before a final political settlement. Gladstone's adamant opposition to another round of imperial conquest contributed to his government's continued division over African policy. Nevertheless, the logic of strategy demanded that these harbours had to be occupied in order to minimise any potential threat to the Royal Navy's dominance in the Gulf of Aden. Hence, when the Victorian explorer Frank Linsly James first visited Berbera in March 1884 in preparation for an expedition into the Somali hinterland, he recalled seeing the Egyptian flag flying over the local fort. When he returned in November 1885, however, he 'hailed the British flag as it fluttered over the grave of Egyptian misrule,' as he later put it in his recounting of the expedition.¹

Caught in an awkward dilemma of their own making, there was some speculation that the Liberals would hand over the ports to Italy, so as to secure them from the Mahdists whilst remaining unencumbered from foreign commitments.² The Cabinet did not feel that Britain could establish a legitimate territorial claim to the ports, but clearly they could not be left to the Mahdists or the French. The Cabinet had already mooted the possibility of returning the administrative responsibility for Suakin to the Porte after the two military expeditions in order to safeguard the town from the Mahdists without having to actually govern the place themselves. As with Suakin, legally Somaliland remained under the suzerainty of the Ottoman sultan. According to their critics, the feckless Liberals would be tempted to ignore their responsibility to preserve British naval hegemony in the Red Sea and cravenly turn over the ports to the Ottomans or the Italians.³

The collapse of the Liberal government in June 1885, however, brought the Marquess of Salisbury to Downing Street, along with a new attitude towards the Empire and grand strategy. In

¹ FL James, *The Unknown Horn of Africa: An Exploration from Berbera to the Leopard River* (London: George Philip & Son, 1888), 10.

² Salisbury, quoted in Charles Whibley, *Lord John Manners and His Friends*, vol. II (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1925), 248.

³ Ibid.

one study of the Foreign Office during this period, TG Otte hailed the fall of Gladstone's government as 'a turning-point in British external affairs.' According to Otte, Salisbury, often portrayed as the arch-pragmatist, crafted a foreign policy which was characterised by an emphasis on the Anglo-German axis along with efforts to check Russian and French ambitions in the Near East and Africa. Under Salisbury's leadership, Britain came to view relations with Germany as 'the central relationship in British foreign policy,'⁴ and ultimately cooperated with Germany in dividing up East Africa at the expense of France. Although Salisbury despised the crude jingoism of the music halls and within some sections of his own party, he was prepared to annex territory if it could be justified on strategic grounds. Having served as Secretary of State for India under Disraeli in the 1870s, Salisbury was acutely aware of the strategic importance of the Empire's lines of communication, and he consolidated his hold over foreign policy by serving as his own foreign secretary.

Even before assuming the premiership, Salisbury had dismissed any notion of giving up the Somali ports. He was loath to see either France or Italy assume naval paramountcy in the Red Sea, 'where we used to be practically supreme,'⁵ and one of his government's first priorities was to secure Britain's hold over Somaliland. Only a month into his ministry, Salisbury formally proclaimed a protectorate over the Somali coast, and informed the Quai d'Orsay that both Berbera and Zeyla were henceforth under British protection.⁶

Two months later, in September 1885 the Foreign Office subsequently learned that the French had retaliated by sending a cruiser with orders to issue a counterclaim to all the adjacent territory surrounding the Gulf of Tadjourra west of Zeyla.⁷ The French had been active in the region since the 1850s, but previously they had been prevented from expanding outside the naval station at

⁴ T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy 1865 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 150.

⁵ Salisbury, quoted in Whibley, *Lord John Manners and His Friends*, 248.

⁶ The National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Letter from Sir J. Pouncefort to Mr. Godley, 20 July 1885.

⁷ The National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Letter from the Marquess of Salisbury to Sir J. Walsham, 3 October 1885.

Obokh by Egyptian claims to the entire African shoreline.⁸ However, the extension of a British protectorate over the Somali coast gave Paris the precedent it needed to seize the deep-water port of Djibouti and to lay claim to all the territory between the city and Obokh, cementing its hold over the Gulf of Tadjourra.

Salisbury's response in October was to order two cruisers to Zeyla, HMS *Sphinx* and HMS *Mariner*, to defend the port against a possible French attack.⁹ No attack was forthcoming, but the move nevertheless demonstrated Salisbury's commitment to retaining the ports and his resolve to back up these claims with naval force if necessary. In doing so, he presented France, Italy, and the Ottomans with a *fait accompli*, effectively annexing the ports and daring the weaker naval powers to challenge him.

The men on the spot in Aden who had issued repeated warnings to London for years about the strategic importance of Berbera welcomed the move. For decades residents in Aden had called on the government to extend British influence or control over the opposite shore of the Gulf of Aden, and the extension of protection over Somaliland preserved Britain's recent gains. Consul Hunter, who had earlier led the first expedition into Somaliland, was only too eager to help the explorer F.L. James to undertake a second expedition in November 1885.¹⁰ According to James, Hunter recognised that exploring the interior would help to underscore Britain's claim to protection for all 50,000 square miles of the Somaliland territory.¹¹ As James wrote in his account of the journey, Somaliland was 'the land we hoped to open up to those advantages and protecting interests one likes to associate with the Union Jack.'¹² JW Schneider, the former Aden Resident who had long argued that control over Berbera was necessary for the defence of Aden, told the

⁸ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, Confidential Memorandum from the Somali Coast Consulate to Her Britannic Majesty's Agent and Consul-General to Egypt, 27 November 1882.

⁹ The National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, Letter, Salisbury to Sir J. Walsham, 3 October 1885.

¹⁰ James, *The Unknown Horn of Africa*, 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 10.

government that 'the ports of Berbera and Zeyla are, for all practical purposes, already occupied and protected by the British Government,' in a memorandum addressed to the India Office in early 1886.¹³

It is not clear how decisive these appeals were in influencing government policy toward Somaliland. Legally, Somaliland still remained an Ottoman possession. Moreover, a series of treaties hastily signed with the native Somali tribes in 1885 merely specified that the tribes would come under British protection, not that they would cede territory to Her Majesty's Government.¹⁴ Indeed, '[Vice Consuls] were given explicit directions that their duties were those of British agents in a native state: they were to keep the peace, but not to assume powers beyond this. No grandiose schemes were to be entertained; expenditure was to be limited to a minimum, and was to be provided by the local port revenues.'¹⁵ Despite these initial restrictions, in August 1886 the Foreign Office effectively abolished the nominal Egyptian administration of Berbera and Zeyla by appointing British officers to oversee both towns. Waving away legal technicalities, the Foreign Office explained that 'there has not even been the shadow of Egyptian authority there'.¹⁶ Accordingly, the office announced, 'the civil administration may now be considered as being conducted by the British officer in charge.'¹⁷

The British annexation of Somaliland was crystallised in February 1888 when Britain and France agreed to demarcate the boundaries between their respective claims. After 'a friendly exchange of views' between Salisbury and William Waddington, the French ambassador, London and Paris agreed to exchange mutual recognition of each other's claims along the Somali coast.¹⁸ France received the whole shoreline surrounding the Gulf of Tadjourra, including the ports of Obokh and

¹³ British Library, London, IOR/L/PS/18/B42, Memorandum by Lieutenant-General JW Schneider, 23 February 1886.

¹⁴ I.M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1982), 47.

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁶ The National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Confidential Records: Correspondence Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, E. Barrington, Memorandum Respecting the Red Sea and Somali Coast, 7 August 1886.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ian Brownlie and Ian Burns, *African Boundaries: A Legal and Diplomatic Encyclopaedia* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1979), 768.

Djibouti, as well as all islands in the bay itself. British control was recognised over Zeyla and extended east to the border of Italian Somaliland.¹⁹ Both powers pledged non-interference in the internal affairs of each other's territories.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the agreement was Clause Four, in which Britain and France agreed to respect the neutrality of Harrar: 'The two Governments engage not to endeavour to annex Harrar, nor to place it under their Protectorate. **In taking this engagement the two Governments do not renounce the right of opposing attempts on the part of any other Power to acquire or assert any rights over Harrar.**'²⁰ Given the legacy of territorial competition in the region, it is particularly noteworthy that both powers agreed to respect the neutrality of Harrar and to oppose any attempts by others to seize it. The explicit reference of the right to oppose the efforts of other powers to take control of the city suggests that this was a tactic which Britain had been willing to pursue in the past. The wording of the clause supports the idea that one of the primary motivations in British territorial expansion into the arid and impoverished interior of northeastern Africa was to block rivals from doing the same. In this case, the agreement over Harrar appears to have been aimed clearly at the Italians, who were eager to expand their foothold into Ethiopia. But it had also been used by Britain previously to prevent France from acquiring the Somali ports.

By this stage Somaliland was a British possession in all but name, although the Ottoman sultan had never formally renounced his suzerainty over the territory. To remove this final vestige of Ottoman-Egyptian control, in 1889 the Treasury agreed to purchase the rights to Somaliland from the Porte on the grounds of its strategic necessity.²¹ This would shift the administrative responsibility for running the territory from the India Office, which controlled the Indian troops being used to garrison Berbera and Zeyla, to the Foreign Office. Salisbury agreed to this in principle, although the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

²¹ British Library, London, IOR/R/20/E, Confidential Letter from the Foreign Office to the Treasury, 29 October 1889.

Foreign Office was cautious about proceeding, noting that 'an offer would, certainly in the present mood of His Imperial Majesty the Sultan, be refused with indignation.'²² As it was, Somaliland was eventually transferred from the India Office to the Foreign Office in 1898, completing its gradual assimilation as a dependency within the British Empire, which it would remain until 1960.

The Somaliland case is one of the clearest examples of aggressive, strategic imperialism which occurred in the Red Sea region. Britain's vested interest in keeping the Somali ports out of European hands was obvious, and British diplomats had signed treaties of recognition with the native tribes as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Despite initial resistance to Ismail's claims to the coast after the opening of the Suez Canal, Britain came to embrace Egyptian claims as a useful and economical way of blocking the French and Italians out of the ports.

The decision to garrison both ports following the Egyptian evacuation in 1884 was simply an extension of this policy taken to its logical conclusion. The Cabinet ensured that Britain became heir to the Egyptian empire by taking direct control over the Somali ports, and took active measures to prevent French and Italian warships from entering the ports upon which Aden was dependent for supplies.²³ In 1885, this was followed up by Salisbury's declaration that the whole Somali coast now fell under British protection, and the 1888 demarcation treaty with France sealing Britain's claim over the interior.

Each stage of Somaliland's assimilation into first the British sphere of influence and then into the Empire itself was justified on the grounds of naval and imperial security. Surrendering the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden with its two principle ports would jeopardise Aden's dominance over the surrounding waters. By seizing Somaliland from the wreck of Ismail's empire, Britain minimised any potential local threat from French or Italian squadrons and ensured the security of the main transport and communication link between the Mediterranean and the eastern territories,

²² Ibid.

²³ Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia*, 46.

enabling fleet based in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean to control the strategic link between them and thereby secure vital national and imperial interests.

East Africa

The origins of Britain's presence in East Africa have been well-documented by historians of the Empire, and the archival records relating to the expansion of the Empire into present-day Kenya have been thoroughly examined. In particular, the majority of the literature pertaining to the topic has focused on Sir William Mackinnon, the enterprising Scottish shipping magnate behind the Imperial British East Africa Company, and the high-level diplomacy between Salisbury and Bismarck which culminated in the Anglo-German Treaty of 1890. This is entirely understandable, given the rich archival collections left by Mackinnon and both the British and German foreign ministries.

This chapter aims to identify the naval and imperial defence components which also lay behind the desire to annex East Africa. Mackinnon, one of the primary driving forces behind the British colonisation of Kenya, undoubtedly pursued territorial gains for private profit. However, there is also evidence indicating that he was concerned about imperial defence in the western Indian Ocean, and that these concerns played a role in his self-appointed mission to conquer East Africa. This chapter will analyse the conclusions of his biographers and suggest that as a shipping magnate Mackinnon was inclined to focus on the Empire's lines of communication.

The chapter will also address Robinson's and Gallagher's argument in *Africa and the Victorians* that East Africa was annexed in order to secure the headwaters of the Nile. Recent scholarship has criticised this thesis as overly-simplistic, and lacking in documentary evidence.²⁴ Not only had the British had been interested in East Africa prior to the collapse of Egyptian Sudan, but

²⁴ Jonas Fossli Gjersø, 'The Scramble for East Africa: British Motives Reconsidered, 1884-95', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43:5 (2015), 832.

the idea that a European power could divert the Nile in order to starve Egypt as a wartime manoeuvre appears faintly far-fetched – although the possibility that senior statesmen at the time believed this cannot be ruled out entirely. Nevertheless, the lack of archival evidence undermines Robinson's and Gallagher's argument, and Jonas Gjørsø in his assessment of imperialism in East Africa rightly calls for a departure from the 'Nile-centric' view of British motivations.²⁵ Britain's perspective on the world was made from the viewpoint of the sea, and Britain maintained a significant interest in East Africa, because of its ports and proximity to vital ocean routes.

Mackinnon & the Imperial British East Africa Company

Serious British interest in East Africa can be traced back to 1878. Britain had maintained a presence in the court of the Sultan of Zanzibar since the mid-nineteenth century, while gunboats of the East Indies Squadron had patrolled the islands and coastline of East Africa hunting slave ships since the 1860s. Though still independent, Zanzibar was firmly within the British sphere of influence. However, excluding the private explorers who launched their own expeditions into the African interior, Britain's official consular presence had been confined to Zanzibar itself. Much like Egypt in Sudan and Somaliland, the Sultanate's historic (if vague) claims to the East African coastline were important to the Royal Navy only in that they provided a convenient legal justification for maintaining anti-slavery patrols in the littoral zone.

In 1878, William Mackinnon threatened to upend the status quo in this backwater by attempting to lease a port on the African mainland.²⁶ In order to do so, he proposed forming a private chartered company to purchase the rights to Dar-es-Salaam which would provide access to the interior.²⁷ Mackinnon, a shrewd Scots businessman, started life as a grocer's clerk in Argyllshire

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network, 1823-93* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 418.

but rose to become one of the most powerful ship-owners in the British Empire. His British-India Steam Navigation Company began in 1856 as a small service plying the route between Calcutta and Rangoon, and under Mackinnon's leadership BI steadily expanded its routes across the Indian Ocean. Ultimately, BI would become the largest shipping company in the Indian Ocean, subsidised by the British government to carry all the mails between the Indian Empire, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and along the east coast of Africa. Even before the Suez Canal was completed in 1869, BI was treated as an 'agent of imperial power.'²⁸ Although a private company, the close relationship between Mackinnon's company and the imperial government meant that 'the edifice of British consular authority in East Africa and the Persian Gulf' depended on BI.²⁹ Both the Persian Gulf and the East African coast were important regions within British India's sphere of influence, and BI's ships acted effectively as surrogates for the Crown.

In addition to his business interests in East Africa, Mackinnon was also involved in supporting humanitarian work on the continent. A devout Calvinist, Mackinnon had financed overseas Christian missions since the 1860s.³⁰ His private letters reveal a deep personal commitment to spreading the Gospel, and he gave generously to various charity appeals put out by the Free Church of Scotland to support its missionaries in Africa.³¹ Mackinnon was committed to the ideals of evangelism and the spreading of Christian civilisation to the Dark Continent. Leopold II's call to form a philanthropic organisation to establish a humanitarian state ostensibly for such a purpose, the International African Association (IAA), strongly appealed to Mackinnon's sense of Christian duty. Beguiled, like most Europeans, by Leopold's lofty rhetoric of humanitarianism into inadvertently helping him lay the foundations for a personal colony in central Africa, Mackinnon became deeply involved in the creation of the IAA in 1876. Indeed, after returning from the Brussels Geographic

²⁸ Ibid., 164.

²⁹ Ibid., 347.

³⁰ School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, London, PP MS 1, Sir William MacKinnon Papers, Letter to William MacKinnon to anonymous, 17 January 1868.

³¹ Ibid.

Conference in September 1876, Mackinnon led the way in creating a Scottish branch of the British national IAA committee.³²

Following the conference, Mackinnon and Leopold developed a close working relationship, the king using Mackinnon as a useful point of contact in Britain. One of the principle obstacles Leopold faced was the lack of a legal precedent to justify the annexation of territory by a private organisation, as his front organisation, the International African Association (IAA), was attempting to do in the Congo Basin. On Leopold's behalf, Mackinnon began searching for any possible legal or historical cases which would legitimise this move in the eyes of the Great Powers.³³ A report exploring whether or not an organisation could acquire sovereignty over undeveloped territories from local tribes or chieftains, for example, was included in Mackinnon's personal correspondence with Leopold.³⁴

Mackinnon's relationship with Leopold was important because it inspired his own scheme to annex territory in eastern Africa for Britain. After returning from Brussels, Mackinnon began to conceive of a British zone of economic influence in East Africa, operated by private concession and made financially viable by the construction of a road from the coast into the interior.³⁵ He persuaded the Scottish branch of the IAA to endorse his plan as early as November 1876.³⁶ Neatly dovetailing with his personal interests in spreading Christian civilisation into Africa, purchasing a lease for Dar-es-Salaam would also give BI a useful hub to secure a planned new steamer routes from Britain and India to South Africa via Zanzibar.³⁷

³² John S. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 45.

³³ 'Can the Independent Chiefs of Savage Tribes cede to any Private Individual the whole or a part of their States, together with the Sovereign Rights which belong to them in conformity with the Traditional Customs of the Country?' (London: Spottiswoode, 1884), in School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, London, PP MS 1, Sir William MacKinnon Papers.

³⁴ Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878 – 1895*, 45.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and East Africa*, 418.

Unfortunately for Mackinnon, his proposal to establish a permanent British presence on the mainland was quietly vetoed by Salisbury, then serving as Secretary of State for India.³⁸ Salisbury was dubious of Mackinnon's self-serving scheme and was eager not to upset the political situation in Zanzibar, which remained an important station for the East Indies Squadron's anti-slaving patrols. Through Zanzibar, Britain was already able to project indirect influence over the Swahili Coast without incurring the expenses, or legal and political wrangles, associated with governing.

Following Salisbury's decision to cancel Mackinnon's Dar-es-Salaam project, British interest in Kenya lapsed until 1884. In that year, the Royal Society sponsored an expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro under the command of Sir Henry Johnston, a botanist with previous experience in Africa.³⁹ The society was interested studying the flora and fauna in the valleys surrounding the mountain, and given Johnston's experience collecting specimens in Angola, he was a natural choice.⁴⁰

After arriving in East Africa, Johnston began reporting to London that the area was fertile and the climate was healthy for Europeans, suggesting that it would be an ideal area for British settlement.⁴¹ With encouragement from the British consul at Zanzibar, Johnston also signed commercial treaties with a number of local tribes, which were also sent back to London for ratification.⁴² News of Johnston's discoveries set off a storm of speculation in Britain over the possibilities of founding a commercial colony in the highlands of East Africa.⁴³ In September 1884, when news arrived that Johnston had unilaterally signed commercial treaties with the local tribes, Britain was preparing to participate in the upcoming Berlin Conference, scheduled to open in November. Johnston's proposals to found a colony at the base of Kilimanjaro led some in Britain to

³⁸ Gjersø, 'The Scramble for East Africa: British Motives Reconsidered, 1884-95', 832.

³⁹ Roland Oliver, 'Johnston, Sir Henry Hamilton (1858–1927)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34211>, accessed 3 June 2017].

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gjersø, 'The Scramble for East Africa: British Motives Reconsidered, 1884-95', 834.

⁴² Oliver, 'Johnston, Sir Henry Hamilton (1858-1927)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁴³ Ibid.

wonder whether the government should focus on building a new sphere of influence in East Africa rather than attempting to hold on to the pestilential colonies on the west coast during the negotiations.⁴⁴ The idea even reached the Cabinet, until it was personally vetoed by Gladstone.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the idea took hold, and in 1885 a group of capitalists, including Mackinnon, sent a formal proposal to the British government, asking for permission to found a settlement in the area connected by railway to the port of Mombasa on the Swahili Coast.⁴⁶ Although this group was undoubtedly motivated by the profits seemingly offered by the fertile highlands, by 1885 the idea of establishing a British colony in East Africa had taken on a strategic significance thanks to the efforts of the indefatigable German imperialist Carl Peters. Peters had spent much of 1884 and 1885 tramping across East Africa, ignoring completely the nominal sovereignty of the Sultan of Zanzibar, signing treaties with local chieftains in an attempt to achieve his vision of founding a German colonial empire. Britain's once unchallenged informal control over the region ended when the German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, decided to endorse these efforts through the granting of an imperial charter to Peters' German East Africa Company.⁴⁷

Peters and Bismarck forced Whitehall's hand, and the Foreign Office was compelled to agree to open negotiations on creating British and German spheres of influence in East Africa. As part of these negotiations, the two governments undertook a survey of the Zanzibari sultanate, to ascertain exactly which parts of the mainland could be considered being under the sultan's control.⁴⁸ Herbert Kitchener, who had previously carried out a government survey of the Middle East, was appointed to the Zanzibar Boundary Commission after serving in Wolseley's River Column. He was tasked with charting the northern areas of the Swahili Coast claimed by Zanzibar.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Gjørsø, 'The Scramble for East Africa,' 834.

⁴⁵ Oliver, 'Johnston, Sir Henry Hamilton (1858-1927)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁴⁶ _____ *Handbook of Railways in Africa* (London: Naval Staff Intelligence Department, 1919), 524.

⁴⁷ Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895*, 117.

⁴⁸ Anne Samson, 'Kitchener, Horatio,' in Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *Dictionary of African Biography*, vol. 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 394.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

After arriving in East Africa, Kitchener despatched a memorandum back to Whitehall in August 1886 advising that the government should ensure that Mombasa fell within Britain's sphere of influence and out of German hands. He pointed out that Zanzibar had become a vital communications and refuelling hub, which was potentially dangerous as the island remained independent from British rule:

our large coaling-station at Zanzibar...is at the mercy of any attack, and English ships in these waters have to rely, in case of breakdown or mishap, on the Seychelles, an undeveloped station of doubtful capabilities, and at considerable distance...[T]he balance of power is also affected by the presence of a German fleet sent here with avowed hostile intentions to the Sovereign Power, Zanzibar, and by the proposed permanent establishment of two German men-of-war in these waters.⁵⁰

Kitchener pressed the government to assume control over Mombasa for strategic reasons, as they had done the with ports in Sudan, Somaliland, and Yemen. According to one his biographers, Kitchener's report successfully persuaded the Earl of Rosebery, who was then serving as Foreign Secretary during Gladstone's brief 1886 ministry.⁵¹ Rosebery in turn leant on the Admiralty to accept the proposal by gaining the support of the Colonial and Indian offices in favour of annexing the port.

Interestingly, the Admiralty was reluctant to assume responsibility for another port in the region, believing that Zanzibar was sufficient to meet the East Indies Squadrons' anti-slaving duties on the East African coast. However, the War Office now also felt that possessing the port was vital for British imperial interests. In his recent critique of the strategic argument for the motivation behind imperial expansion in northeastern Africa, Jonas Gjørsø pointed to a memorandum from the War Office which argued that Britain's economic interests in East Africa were best served by taking Mombasa.⁵² The War Office's rationale echoed the recommendation made by Sir John Kirk, consul at

⁵⁰ Sir George Arthur, *Life of Lord Kitchener*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵² Gjørsø, 'The Scramble for East Africa,' 837.

Zanzibar, who pointed to Mombasa's potential as a terminus for a railway to Lake Victoria and equatorial Africa.⁵³

It may be the case that the War Office was keen to defend Britain's economic interests in East Africa by taking control over an important commercial port. But given the War Office's instrumental role in seizing Perim, Suakin, and Somaliland, it seems more credible to think that military-imperial concerns played a major role in the calculations behind the office's support for Kitchener's and Rosebery's proposals to take Mombasa. Indeed, as Gjersø notes, the War Office's memorandum also referenced the all-important cable which ran from Aden to Cape Town via Zanzibar, then the only link between London, Bombay and with the Royal Navy's vital strategic base at the Cape of Good Hope. As previously discussed, the entire concept of imperial defence rested on the security of these telegraph wires, and the importance attached to securing British-owned communication hubs for imperial security is difficult to overstate. The War Office's reference to Mombasa's potential as a communication link may be more significant than Gjersø initially assumed.

In 1886, Britain and Germany ultimately decided to establish two respective spheres of influence in East Africa, at the expense of the sultan of Zanzibar, whose claims to mainland Africa, London and Berlin decided, were limited only to a ten-mile periphery from the coast.⁵⁴ No-one was in a better position to take advantage of this development than Mackinnon, who controlled the largest shipping company operating routes along East Africa. In 1887, Mackinnon formed the British East Africa Association created to facilitate access to equatorial Africa for commercial speculation.⁵⁵ In 1888, the association was transformed into the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), empowered by a royal charter permitting Mackinnon to explore and annex territory in pursuit of private profit.

⁵³ Ibid., 836.

⁵⁴ *Handbook of Railways in Africa*, 524.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Taken at face value, this was capitalism at its most brazen, and the north-south demarcation negotiations between Britain and Germany over their respective protectorates were dominated by the need to secure trade routes for each power from Uganda to the coast.⁵⁶ However, the strategic rationale behind the annexation of East Africa was hidden behind this outward display of Victorian muscular commercial enterprise, and is best found in the character of Mackinnon himself. To be sure, he was a titan of industry and as much interested in profit as he was in pursuing higher goals. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests Mackinnon also chose to act in East Africa out of concerns for Britain's standing as paramount maritime power in the Indian Ocean. This becomes clear by examining in examining his status as a shipping magnate as well as in his abortive foray into Parliamentary politics and in the IBEAC itself.

As discussed previously, Mackinnon's British-India shipping company effectively acted as an agent of the imperial government beyond the official boundaries of the British Empire. This was not unique to BI, indeed other European governments viewed overseas shipping lines as flag-carriers in areas beyond the pale of formal European control. By the 1880s, a sort of neo-mercantilism had emerged in which rivalries between national shipping lines in distant waters merged with great power politics. Each European power aggressively subsidised its own carriers in order to expand their political influence by augmenting their route networks and undercutting their competitors.⁵⁷ Mackinnon and BI helped to defend Britain's informal empire in the tropics by dominating the mail and passenger services connecting them with Europe.

Part of the reason Mackinnon was interested in acquiring Mombasa was because he envisioned turning it into a hub for BI connecting the Cape with India and Britain *via* the Red Sea.⁵⁸ A harbour for BI steamers on the coast would consolidate BI's grip over the eastern coastal routes, which was beginning to be challenged by French companies, heavily subsidised by Paris, operating

⁵⁶ Gjersø, 'The Scramble for East Africa,' 838.

⁵⁷ Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, 420.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 418.

the Marseilles-Madagascar route.⁵⁹ This was therefore both an investment in BI's future as the largest shipping company in the Indian Ocean, and a means of upholding Britain's informal paramountcy in the ocean.⁶⁰ Indeed, one of Mackinnon's biographers concluded that whilst his efforts were clearly commercial in nature, 'they were also embedded in turbulent international politics – the Scramble for Africa and the competitive subsidisation of shipping and shipbuilding.'⁶¹ Control over the port of Mombasa would give Mackinnon a distinct edge over his commercial rivals, and hence Britain over France, Germany, and Italy. If British companies such as BI continued to dominate the Indian Ocean, something that obtaining key ports such as Mombasa would assist them in doing, then by proxy Britain itself would continue the rule the waves and sea-beds of those particular oceans. If the imperial defence project was to be realised, Britain needed to directly or indirectly control the flow of shipping and information between London and its primary naval bases around the world, and interdict those of a future enemy.

As an agent of the imperial government, Mackinnon would have been acutely aware of Britain's strategic maritime interests – indeed, his ships had even been used to transport troops from India to Suez during the 1882 intervention in Egypt.⁶² As early as the 1850s, Mackinnon had established a business partnership with fellow West Scot and imperial cable magnate John Pender, which by 1870 had blossomed into a mutual friendship.⁶³ Pender's wife Rose was even invited to travel on the inaugural BI service on the Aden-Zanzibar route when it first opened.⁶⁴ Mackinnon was also a friend of Sir Bartle Frere, the former Governor of Bombay who had been appointed by Lord Carnarvon to oversee his grand design (partly inspired by James Anthony Froude) of federating

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 420.

⁶² Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895*, 383.

⁶³ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 186.

southern Africa.⁶⁵ In return for their staunch support for BI, Frere and several of his close associates were routinely offered directorships in Mackinnon's companies.⁶⁶

Mackinnon's personal network also included Lord Lorne, son of the Duke of Argyll and former Governor-General of Cana. In 1884 Lorne persuaded Mackinnon to run for Parliament standing for the Argyll seat controlled by his father.⁶⁷ According one of Mackinnon's biographers, Mackinnon was persuaded in part by his anger with Gladstone's failure over Sudan, running on a Liberal imperialist platform during the 1885 general election. His first speech in August of that year, which was covered in the *Glasgow Herald*, was almost entirely devoted to Empire. On the hustings, Mackinnon openly called for the annexation of Egypt, because it was 'of paramount importance to the safety of the Indian Empire' along with increased naval expenditure, and an endorsement of imperial defence.⁶⁸ Although Mackinnon lost the election and never again attempted to run for Parliament, his 1885 manifesto clearly revealed his commitment to the navy, imperial defence, and Britain's future in northeastern Africa.

In lieu of a position in Parliament, Mackinnon's IBEAC became 'a vehicle for the realization of Imperial objectives.'⁶⁹ The IBEAC's dual mission to secure commercial profit and to expand British political hegemony is evident in the people Mackinnon chose to run it, as well as the circumstances under which it was formed. The IBEAC's board of directors included Thomas, Lord Brassey, the influential navalist, Sir Francis de Winton, Lorne's secretary during his time in Canada and one-time administrator-general of Leopold II's Congo,⁷⁰ and Sir Lewis Pelly, one of Frere's protégés who had

⁶⁵ Ibid., 348.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 383.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 385.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁰ J. H. Leslie, 'Winton, Sir Francis Walter de (1835–1901)', rev. Roger T. Stearn, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2006 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32806, accessed 8 July 2017].

served as consul in Zanzibar and British Resident in the Persian Gulf.⁷¹ Also included on the board was William Burdett-Coutts, brother of the Civil Lord of the Admiralty and husband to one of the primary donors to the British East Africa Association, the earlier iteration of the IBEAC before it obtained its royal charter.⁷²

In addition to its board of directors, the site of the company's offices was also revealing. Located in a commanding suite of rooms in Pall Mall, the IBEAC projected an image of political officialdom by locating itself close to the seat of government in Westminster rather than the traditional commercial centre in the City of London.⁷³ Even the name of Mackinnon's organisation, the *Imperial* British East Africa Company strongly suggests Mackinnon intended it to have a dual function as a commercial enterprise and a Crown agent. Moreover, unlike the flags of previous mercantilist companies which adopted only English or British ensigns, the flag of the IBEAC was a full Union flag defaced by an Imperial crown and an African sun. This flag was a powerful symbol of the company's close relationship with the Crown, its authority to act as a proxy of the British government, and of its intention to annex the territory which it controlled.

The proceedings of one of the IBEAC's annual general meetings make it quite clear that the company was driven by the pursuit of profit, eradication of the slave trade, and Great Power politics. IBEAC's chief administrator, Sir George Mackenzie, formerly a director in BI, announced that the company was undertaking negotiations with the Italian government for apportioning East African ports... [as] it was most important to get rid of the Germans at Witu.⁷⁴ According to Mackenzie, 'This now became a British protectorate, and they had there the Port of Lamu, which was second only to Mombasa, on the East Coast...[the Company would secure] the interests, political and commercial

⁷¹ William Broadfoot, 'Pelly, Sir Lewis (1825–1892)', rev. K. D. Reynolds, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21816, accessed 8 July 2017].

⁷² Brian Holden Reid, 'Coutts, William Lehman Ashmead Bartlett Burdett- (1851–1921)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2015 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/58663, accessed 8 July 2017].

⁷³ Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895*, 422.

⁷⁴ 'The Imperial British East Africa Company,' *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, July & August 1890.

[in Kenya]...for ever'.⁷⁵ Mackenzie was a fervent imperialist,⁷⁶ as was his employer, and under his direction IBEAC acted as if it were a proxy for the imperial government and the Royal Navy in East Africa.

In fact, under Mackenzie the IBEAC was actively cultivating links with the East Indies Station. Mackenzie established a working partnership with Admiral Sir Edmund Fremantle, its commander-in-chief.⁷⁷ At the company's annual general meeting, Mackenzie confirmed that Fremantle had personally recommended to the Admiralty that Mombasa be transformed into a naval base for the East Indies Station. According to Mackenzie, Fremantle felt that 'its capacity as a naval harbour, the salubrity of its climate, and other advantages, to be a port in every way adapted to be the headquarters of her Majesty's cruisers in these waters.'⁷⁸ The company would therefore, Mackenzie confirmed, proceed at once 'with such works as will ensure this harbour offering every reasonable facility as a commercial and naval coaling station.'⁷⁹ Here was direct evidence that significant sections of the Royal Navy were working to influence the government in favour of annexing Mombasa, with support from a corporate entity which considered itself a proxy for the Foreign Office. Indeed, whilst Whitehall was reluctant to involve itself in the area, certain segments of the navy and Mackinnon were seemingly pushing the imperial government into action by beginning the construction of dockyard works to serve the navy as well as BI.

Despite a board with distinguished names and the backing of the largest shipping company in the Indian Ocean, however, the Imperial British East Africa Company did not prove to be profitable and teetered towards collapse. Although it succeeded in extending its territorial control over Uganda in the 1890s, war with the Kabaka of Buganda in 1892 bankrupted the IBEAC, forcing

⁷⁵ Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895*, 422.

⁷⁶ C. P. Lucas, 'Mackenzie, Sir George Sutherland (1844–1910)', rev. Colin Newbury, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34750>, accessed 17 Sept 2017].

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ 'The Imperial British East Africa Company,' *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, July & August 1890.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

the British government to assume responsibility for its territories in 1895 in order to prevent them from falling into German hands.⁸⁰

Summarising IBEAC's history, Sir Percy Anderson wrote that 'There is no question that the objects of the founders of this Company were purely humanitarian, though it was hoped that it might pay its way.'⁸¹ Anderson had been the Foreign Office's principal African expert for years and was intimately involved in the establishment of British protectorates across the continent. In Mackinnon's case though, it would perhaps be more accurate to state that the objects of the IBEAC were humanitarian as well as strategic. Mackinnon's abortive foray into Parliamentary politics and the men with whom he surrounded himself professionally strongly suggest that he felt was fulfilling some sense of imperial duty by conquering East Africa. As a shipping magnate, Mackinnon clearly foresaw the importance of Mombasa to the British imperial defence network along the east African seaboard. Whilst his company was created with the aim of securing profits, it was also very much an attempt to secure British maritime and political paramountcy in a region vital for its links between Aden and the Cape. Even in failure it succeeded.

Eastern Telegraph Company in Mombasa

Another powerful corporate entity advocating the annexation of Mombasa was John Pender's Eastern Telegraph Company. As previously discussed, the ETC was the government's primary agent in creating the telegraph network of the eastern empire, and Pender maintained close personal links with both Mackinnon and senior members of the British government. By establishing a monopoly over imperial telegraphic communications east of Suez, Pender became the unofficial

⁸⁰ Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895*, 167.

⁸¹ Anderson, quoted in Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, 409.

minister of cables and was the man to whom Whitehall turned whenever new links needed to be laid to outposts in the Indian Ocean region.⁸²

When war broke out between the British colonies in South Africa and the powerful Zulu empire, the Cape Colony and Natal remained isolated from the imperial cable network. In response to the conflict, the government quickly ordered a cable be laid between Aden and Durban to improve the war effort and to ensure rapid communications between the War Office and military commanders in the field. Accordingly, Pender formed the Eastern & South African cable company under the ETC umbrella.⁸³ ETC cable ships began laying cables down the east coast of Africa from Aden, with branch lines to the Seychelles and the important naval base in Mauritius.⁸⁴ The cable arrived in Cape Town in May 1879, in time for the planned second invasion of Zululand which followed the disaster at Isandlwana in January of that year.⁸⁵

As part of the arrangement, the government agreed to pay Pender over one million pounds to lay the cable, on condition that official messages were given priority over ordinary traffic,⁸⁶ and that all infrastructure would be assumed by the Royal Navy in wartime.⁸⁷ Pender also pledged to permanently station a maintenance ship in the Indian Ocean or the Red Sea to repair cables, and in times of conflict, to sever the cables of belligerent powers.⁸⁸ This was a strategic investment on the part of the British government, and by controlling the only link between London and South Africa, Pender gained even more influence over imperial policy.

⁸² Anton A. Huurdeman, *The Worldwide History of Telecommunications* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 137.

⁸³ Charles Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs* (London: C. Lockwood and Son, 1898), 131.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ 'New Submarine Cables,' *Journal of the Franklin Institute* (September 1879), 206.

⁸⁶ PM Kennedy, 'Imperial Cable Communications and Strategy, 1870-1914,' in Paul Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers: 1880 – 1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 82.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁸ 'New Submarine Cables,' 206.

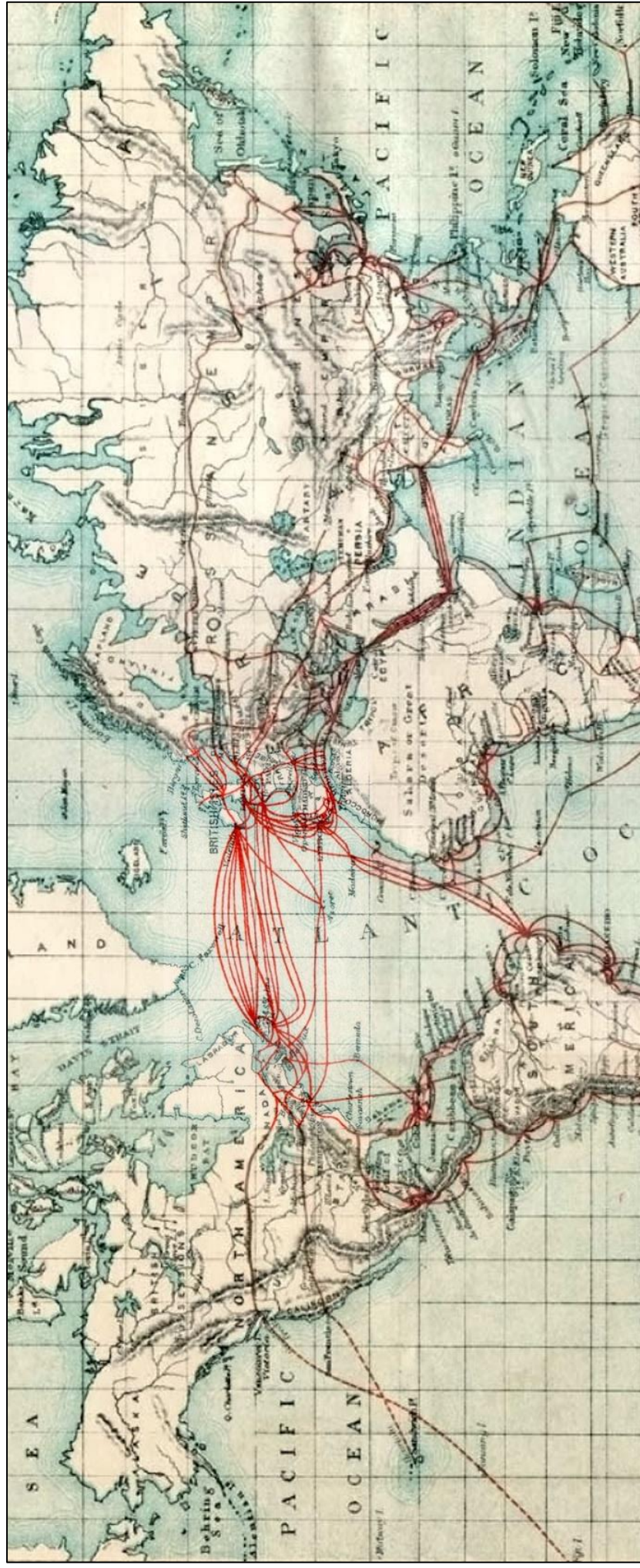


Figure 8: Extent of the Eastern Telegraph Company's wires by the early twentieth century. Note: before the cables were laid along the West African coast during the Edwardian period, the only undersea cable connection from London to Aden, Cape Town, India, and Australia ran through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The Eastern Telegraphic System and General Connections – 1894 [map]. 1894. Scale not given, Porthcurno Telegraph Museum, PHO///182.
<https://telegraphmuseum.org/explore/collection/maps-charts/>.

Pender was keen to ensure that Eastern's cables were protected from attack by hostile powers as the imperial communication network would be a key strategic target in the event of a general war. Laid along the seabed, they would be protected from enemy ships by the Royal Navy's cruiser fleet, as long as they were beneath major shipping routes such as those of BI and the P&O. However, the land-based repeater stations where they surfaced were vulnerable to raids by warships. The distance between Aden and South Africa meant that a repeater station had to be constructed along the line, and whilst one was established in Zanzibar as a matter of expediency during the Zulu war, it clearly was the most vulnerable point on the cable. Therefore, Pender had a significant interest in rerouting the London-South Africa link via a more secure port.

Mombasa was a natural choice for the location of a booster station, especially after Pender's friend William Mackinnon acquired the port for his BI steamers. It lay more or less midway between Aden and South Africa, and outside the control of any recognised government. Relations between IBEAC and the Royal Navy were already amicable in Mombasa, as cruisers often stopped in the port whilst on anti-slaving patrols.⁸⁹ By 1889, Mombasa was connected by cable to Zanzibar, and rerouting the main line to the port would have been a simple matter.⁹⁰

As a result of his privileged position as imperial cablemaster, Pender had already been involved in pushing forward the boundaries of empire. When Cyprus was annexed following the 1878 Congress of Berlin, Pender's son Harry was chosen to be the first British representative sent to the island.⁹¹ In addition to his duties as Her Majesty's representative, Harry Pender also retained his role as director within ETC, presumably to assess the island's suitability as a communications hub. The Conservative government at the time envisioned turning Cyprus into a Mediterranean Aden to

⁸⁹ Christine Stephanie Nicholls, *Red Strangers: The White Tribe of Kenya* (London: Timewell Press, 2005), 17.

⁹⁰ 'The Imperial British East Africa Company,' *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, July & August 1890.

⁹¹ Simone M. Müller, *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 98.

guard the northern approaches to the Suez Canal, and Harry Pender symbolised the close working relationship between the policymakers in Whitehall and their proxies in the ETC.⁹²

There is every reason to believe that Pender advocated for the annexation of Mombasa on the grounds that the port would serve as a secure node for the telegraph network in the western Indian Ocean. Pender was well aware that the Indian and Colonial offices were eager to create an all-red imperial cable network in the Indian Ocean to underpin British commercial and strategic power, as he was the man responsible for executing that vision.⁹³ As the communications historian Sujatha Sosale has found, the Indian Ocean was a zone of fierce competition between the European powers, and dominance over communications was a key aspect of British strategy in the region at the time.⁹⁴ A paper published by the telegraph reform advocate J. Henniker Heaton in 1899 calling on the ETC to introduce cheaper rates for personal messages by laying shorter cables through foreign territory implies that Pender viewed his company first as an agent of the imperial government, rather than as a service provider for the general public.⁹⁵

The true extent of Pender's influence on his friends and colleagues in government is difficult to accurately assess, as the type of back-room negotiations and horse-trading which characterised many such government decisions are not included in official records. However, following the Suakin expeditions, the Colonial Defence Committee decided that the Aden-South Africa cable could no longer run through Zanzibar, as it was impossible to build fortifications in an independent state.⁹⁶ Instead, the CDC recommended that the cable be landed in Mombasa, where it could more easily be defended by a garrison.⁹⁷ The cable was rerouted accordingly, and Mombasa became one of ETC's primary hubs in the western Indian Ocean.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Sujatha Sosale, 'Mapping and Modernizing the Indian Ocean Rim: Communication technologies under colonial Britain,' *Global Media and Communications* 10:2, vol. 1 (2014), 168.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁹⁵ J. Henniker Heaton, 'An Imperial Telegraph System,' *The Nineteenth Century*, June 1899.

⁹⁶ Kennedy, 'Imperial Cable Communications and Strategy, 1870-1914,'

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Sudan

Despite the Liberal government's intention to evacuate Sudan, the two military expeditions sent to Suakin in 1884 and 1885 left a permanent British presence in the Red Sea Littoral province of the former Egyptian Sudan. Cairo continued to appoint a provincial governor, headquartered in the port, although after 1885 this post was always filled by a British military officer⁹⁸ – the first being Major Herbert Kitchener. In 1886, Egypt agreed to pay the British government to maintain a permanent garrison in Suakin, which would be considered part of the Army of Occupation in Egypt proper.⁹⁹ After the fall of Khartoum and the creation of the Mahdist State, Suakin remained the last fragment of Egyptian territory in the former Egyptian Sudan.

As argued in Chapter IV, Britain agreed to maintain a military presence in Suakin in order to prevent a potentially strategic port from falling into the hands of the Mahdists, French, or Italians. After the Panjdeh crisis in 1885 and the collapse of Gladstone's ministry, there was no appetite in London for further conflict in Sudan. Having secured the principal Red Sea ports, there was no reason for British policymakers to launch further costly interventions to Khartoum for the rest of the 1880s.

Early attempts by Kitchener to reverse the policy of evacuation ('scuttling', as he and other critics termed it), were rebuffed.¹⁰⁰ Commissioned to report on the state of Sudan in May 1885, Kitchener suggested to his superiors that the three most senior traditional Sudanese leaders, the Mudirs, should be armed and funded in return for reorganising Sudan as a loose confederacy under Egyptian suzerainty.¹⁰¹ In response to his report, Sir Charles Wilson, head of the Intelligence

⁹⁸ National Archives, Kew, WO 28/371, War Office Records, Condition of the Sudan, Report on the Beni Amer Country, by L. Holled Smith CB, 17 March 1892.

⁹⁹ National Archives, Kew, WO 33/48, War Office Records, Correspondence relative to Egyptian Military Expenditures, Memorandum by Colonel Ardagh, 6 December 1886.

¹⁰⁰ The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/6/13, Report on the Present Situation and Future Government of the Sudan, Major Herbert Kitchener, 1885.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Department in Cairo, replied that the government in London simply would not sanction further action in Sudan. Wilson wrote,

I said as strongly as I could that if they evacuated now they would have to reconquer the country in less than ten years' time. I thought they were going to change their minds but there is no prospect of that now. I am awfully disgusted, they have been trying to make me responsible for the "scuttling" policy as well as for Gordon's murder and the fall of Khartoum.¹⁰²

After receiving Wilson's reply, Kitchener was subsequently transferred to the governorship in Suakin. Troops were stationed in Wadi Halfa to prevent the Mahdi advancing into Egypt, and the Sudanese interior was left to the Mahdists.

When Suakin was threatened, however, Britain was prepared to expend blood and treasure to defend it. As governor in Suakin, Kitchener attempted to close with Osman Digna, who remained at large beyond the city's walls.¹⁰³ In January 1888, Kitchener led a force of irregulars in a raid on Digna's camp at the wells of Handoub, north of Suakin. The raid failed to capture Digna, and Kitchener was forced to withdraw after being seriously wounded.¹⁰⁴ Digna subsequently rallied his forces and laid siege to Suakin in the summer of 1888.¹⁰⁵ Rather than directly assaulting the curtain wall, bastions, and heavy guns installed by the Royal Engineers, Digna and his fighters encircled the town with siege trenches which worked steadily towards the walls.

The Liberals, now in opposition, blamed Kitchener for inciting the eastern Sudanese tribes to rally once again to Digna and for the ensuing siege of Suakin.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, by the end of December 1888, the situation had deteriorated to the point that Sir Francis Grenfell, Sirdar of the

¹⁰² The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/5/39, Letter from W. Wilson to Colonel Herbert Kitchener, 10 May 1885.

¹⁰³ Michael Barthorp, *War on the Nile: Britain, Egypt and the Sudan 1882-1898* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1986), 132.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ 'The Battle at Suakim', *The Argus*, 23 December 1888.

¹⁰⁶ John Morely, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 December 1888, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. 332 (1888), 462.

Egyptian Army, was forced to arrive with a detachment of troops from Egypt to command a counterattack against the Mahdist positions.¹⁰⁷ On 21 December, Grenfell sortied from the town and drove the Mahdists from their trenches, ending Digna's attempts to take Suakin and demonstrating that Britain was prepared to intervene militarily in Sudan only if its interests were threatened directly.¹⁰⁸

With the exception of Suakin however, Sudan was abandoned as *terra infidelium*, to be ruled as the Mahdist State. However, starting in 1889 the strategic calculus in the Red Sea was once again beginning to change. Two years prior, Lord Cromer's management of the Khedive's finances had ensured that Egypt was once again solvent, and under British oversight the Egyptian army was retrained and re-equipped on European lines. In 1889, the Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, launched an invasion of Upper Egypt from Sudan in an attempt to expand the frontiers of the Mahdist State. Since 1885, the border posts at Wadi Halfa had been manned by Egyptian troops led by British officers, marking the limits of Egypt's dominion in Africa. Marching north, the Khalifa attempted to outflank the Egyptian garrisons stationed in fortified compounds, but his advance was checked and thrown back by Egyptian infantry in the open field at the Battle of Toski.¹⁰⁹ Three thousand Mahdist fighters were cut down by disciplined Egyptian rifle fire before the Khalifa's army broke and fled, ending any further attempts to push the Mahdist State northwards.¹¹⁰

The action at Toski proved that the British had succeeded in turning the formerly moribund Egyptian army into a capable fighting force. The same troops which had been routed within eight minutes just six years earlier at El Teb had fended off a major invasion of Upper Egypt. The victory proved that Egyptian troops could prevail in the field over the Mahdists if and when the time came to re-engage.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ National Archives, Kew, CAB 37/22/43, Cabinet Office Records, The Situation at Suakin, 7 December 1888.

¹⁰⁸ Barthorp, *War on the Nile*, 132.

¹⁰⁹ 'The Battle of Toski: The Delta has Beaten the Desert,' *The Spectator*, 10 August 1889.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Barthorp, *War on the Nile*, 134.

The Battle of Toski was widely reported in Britain, and may have played a role in persuading the government to re-open the Sudanese question the following year. According to one historian of the period, by 1890 it was clear that 'Salisbury [now serving as Prime Minister] and Cromer [Consul-General and now *de facto* leader of Egypt] had decided to take military and political control over the Nile basin.'¹¹² It is clear that to a considerable extent this decision was driven by the supposed need to secure Egypt by placing the entire length of the River Nile under British control in order to prevent other colonial powers from seizing control of the river and potentially interdicting Egypt's national water supply.

Salisbury, according to one of his biographers, had become convinced that Britain simply could not afford to lose Egypt; Egypt now occupied a vital space connecting the two halves of the British Empire.¹¹³ As he wrote in a letter to Sir William White, the British ambassador in Constantinople, 'I was not in a position to consent to fix any date for evacuation [of Egypt] under any conditions.'¹¹⁴ He explained that, 'The guiding-aim of our policy was to strengthen the institutions of Egypt, and to place her under such conditions as would enable her to stand alone, so that she should be secure from the danger of either foreign aggression or internal anarchy. Until those results had been achieved and assured, no date for the evacuation could be fixed.'¹¹⁵

The 'corollary of that decision' was that the Mahdist State could no longer be permitted to rule the Nile Valley, and that Egypt must resume control over Sudan to control the waters and to prevent European rivals from gaining influence in the valley.¹¹⁶ Robert Taylor argued that the Prime Minister's intention was to safeguard Britain's position on the Nile by securing the waters upon which Egypt depended.¹¹⁷ In 1897, for example, Salisbury declared that 'our interest in Egypt is

¹¹² Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power* (London: IB Tauris, 2004), 32.

¹¹³ Robert Taylor, *Lord Salisbury* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 140.

¹¹⁴ Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone, U1590/O237, Stanhope of Chevening Manuscripts, Letter from the Marquis of Salisbury to Sir W. White, 20 October 1891.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Taylor, *Lord Salisbury*, 140.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

growing stronger...the idea that the Turkish Empire is on the verge of dissolution has been dissipated and the Concert of Europe has conclusively shown that it can never be trusted with even the slenderest portion of Executive authority...The only policy which it seems to me is left to us...is to strengthen our position on the Nile.¹¹⁸ John Darwin argued that Salisbury's writings should not be taken completely at face value, and that the decision to move back into Sudan was the result of sub-imperial entities and the advocacy of men-on-the-stop.¹¹⁹ However, concern that other European powers would move to into the vulnerable Sudanese coastal zone clearly played a significant role in the decision to re-invest the territory.

The potential threat to Egypt from the presence of imperial rivals in Sudan was by no means completely unfounded. Even though Britain had handed Massawa over to the Italians in 1885, London still kept a wary eye on developments in the port. Two letters intercepted by Italian authorities in 1887 sent from tribal elders in Suakin to the clans outside Massawa demanding their loyalty, suggest that the British were attempting to project their influence into the area to constrain the expansion of the Italy's foothold.¹²⁰ This was, at the very least, how the Italian commanding officer in Massawa interpreted the letters, and the Italian consul-general in Cairo warned Foreign Minister Robilant that the British in Suakin, specifically Governor Kitchener, would continue attempting to gain influence over the tribes around Massawa in order to box the Italians in.¹²¹

The Italians had already begun discussing the possibility of allying with Osman Digna in order to retaliate against the British in Suakin before Kitchener was wounded fighting Mahdist forces outside the port.¹²² Following Kitchener's redeployment from Suakin, Italian agents began persuading local tribes surrounding Massawa to accept Italian protection.¹²³ A brief, sharp war

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹¹⁹ John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *The English Historical Review* 112:447 (June 1997), 637.

¹²⁰ Anthony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea: the History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 134.

¹²¹ Gené to Robilant, letter, 7 February 1887, quoted in *ibid.*

¹²² Ibid., 123.

¹²³ Ibid., 158.

between the Ethiopian Empire and the Mahdist State also afforded Italy the opportunity to seize Asmara, breaking out of the coastal plain and into the Eritrean highlands whilst the Ethiopians were distracted.¹²⁴ Eager to expand their holdings, the Italians by 1894 were even making moves towards Kassala, the principal settlement in southeastern Sudan close to the Sudanese-Ethiopian frontier.¹²⁵

Salisbury was concerned by Italy's apparent moves towards Sudan, as it was still seen as vital to the defence of Egypt itself.¹²⁶ As Salisbury wrote to Cromer in Egypt, 'the work of 1890 is to keep the other Powers off the Nile...until Egypt was ready to re-occupy the Valley'.¹²⁷ Salisbury had been content to leave the Mahdists as placeholders, writing that 'the Dervishes are rendering us a service in keeping Italy out...Surely if you are not ready to go to Khartoum, this people was created for the purpose of keeping the bed warm till you can occupy it.'¹²⁸ However, Italy's breakout into Eritrea and subsequent moves towards Kassala appeared to threaten the status quo. 'The key towards our position in Europe', wrote Salisbury in his handover message to his successor at the Foreign Office Lord Rosebery, 'is our position towards Italy.'¹²⁹

As early as 1890, Kitchener was once again sent back to the region to compile a general report on Sudan, including details on the Mahdist army and its supplies – further evidence that the government had already begun preparing for a reconquest of Sudan following the Battle of Toski.¹³⁰ The report contained details on troop levels in each province, the internal politics and divisions within the Mahdist State, and the types of weapons and amount of ammunition stockpiled in Khartoum¹³¹ – in short, the type of overview needed in order to plan a full-scale military intervention. Following his appointment as Sirdar of the Egyptian Army in 1892, Kitchener received a

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/12/2, Memorandum on the Reoccupation of the Soudan, 1894.

¹²⁶ Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England, 1830-1902* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 150.

¹²⁷ Salisbury to Cromer, letter, 21 November 1890, quoted in D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, 161.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Salisbury to Rosebery, letter, 18 August 1892, quoted in Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, 432.

¹³⁰ The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/12/1, General Report on the Sudan, Colonel Herbert Kitchener, 1890.

¹³¹ Ibid.

letter from Sir Samuel Baker, former governor of Equatoria and renowned explorer, detailing possible routes to Khartoum because Baker '[felt] sure that the task of regaining the Soudan will fall to yourself.'¹³²

Moreover, also in 1892 the War Office produced a policy briefing advising that Egypt should be absorbed into the imperial defence network and steps be taken to secure the territory from foreign intervention.¹³³ The report noted that Cyprus had not proved to be an adequate base from which to protect the Suez Canal, and that military possession of Egypt alone would preserve 'the command of the route to the Indian Empire and our Colonies...whilst we remain in occupation in Egypt [this route] is open for us and closed for our enemies.'¹³⁴ The logical extension of this argument was that Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea must be protected from rival Europeans, and by 1892 it was becoming increasingly accepted that that would entail reconquering Sudan before the French, Italians, or the Belgians could.¹³⁵

Adowa and the Reoccupation

The supposed necessity of reoccupying Sudan to safeguard Egypt and to thwart the Italians was accepted in principle, but would not be acted upon until the disastrous Italian defeat at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. Salisbury had originally planned to launch a reconquest of Sudan from the south, reasoning that the newly-started railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria could be used to ferry troops and supplies from the coast to invade Sudan from the south through Equatoria. The

¹³² The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/12/2, Letter from Sir Samuel Baker to Colonel Herbert Kitchener, 19 April 1892.

¹³³ The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/12/6, Memorandum on the advantages from an imperial defence point of view of the occupation of Egypt by England, 31 October 1892.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Taylor, *Lord Salisbury*, 140.

railway would first need to reach Lake Victoria, a process expected to take several years, before troops could be transported to the Ugandan-Sudanese frontier.¹³⁶

However, events in Eritrea forced the Cabinet to adopt a new course. An Italian invasion of Ethiopia from its new colony in Eritrea was crushed by Ethiopian imperial forces at the Battle of Adowa in 1896, humiliating Rome and leaving Eritrea dangerously exposed to an Ethiopian counter-offensive.¹³⁷ Italian attempts to extend influence in the Horn by imposing a protectorate over Ethiopia were dashed, and Italy was forced to request Her Majesty's assistance in protecting the Eritrea following the humiliation.¹³⁸

The potential Italian expulsion from the Horn threatened to upend the strategic balance in France's favour in both Europe and northeastern Africa. If the Italians were driven into the sea by the Emperor Menelik's forces, 'not only would European prestige in that area suffer but the Triple Alliance would be weakened, with benefit to France, both in Europe and where her own African aspirations were concerned.'¹³⁹ Moreover, any further weakening of Italy's position would threaten to upend the Mediterranean Agreement of 1887, which Salisbury had orchestrated to keep French naval power in the Mediterranean in check and which was already creaking at the seams.¹⁴⁰ Although Italian possessions in the Horn of Africa were not explicitly covered by the agreement,¹⁴¹ Rome and its nominal ally Austria-Hungary were useful partners in counterbalancing the navies of the Dual Alliance in the Mediterranean. The decision to bring forward the planned invasion of Sudan 'to take the pressure of the Italians' and to establish control over Egypt's water supply appears to have been guided in part by naval considerations in the Mediterranean.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ JAS Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy: the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Athlone Press, 1964), 117.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, 160.

¹³⁹ Barthorp, *War on the Nile*, 138.

¹⁴⁰ Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, 160.

¹⁴¹ W. N. Medlicott, 'The Mediterranean Agreements of 1887,' *The Slavonic Review* 5:13 (June 1926), 71.

¹⁴² Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 287.

With the Ugandan railway still under construction, Kitchener and the Anglo-Egyptian army were to march south from Wadi Halfa, initially to the city of Dongola in northern Sudan. With the invasion underway, by early 1897 the government confirmed that “Egypt could never be held to be permanently secure so long as a hostile Power was in occupation of the Nile valley up to Khartoum.”¹⁴³ Although initially presented merely as an extension of the Egyptian frontier south to Dongola, Kitchener’s invasion was empowered by the Cabinet in 1898 to reconquer Sudan in its entirety and to restore Egyptian claims over the territory.¹⁴⁴ In September of that year, the Anglo-Egyptian army reached the outskirts of Khartoum, where the main force of the Mahdists had collected, and annihilated them, effectively destroying the Mahdist State in a single day at the Battle of Omdurman. By 1899, Sudan was administered officially as a joint British-Egyptian condominium, and in reality as a Crown dependency of the British Empire, the final territory to be seized by the British in northeastern Africa.

Although the British had clearly intended to reoccupy Sudan since 1885, it is perhaps significant that the catalyst for the final invasion in 1896 was prompted by concerns over the naval situation in the Mediterranean. Although other factors influenced this decision. As Terje Tvedt rightly points out, Lord Cromer was eager to extend British control over the Nile for as much strategic reasons as well as economic, in order to guarantee a steady supply of water for his extensive agricultural reforms in Lower Egypt.¹⁴⁵ As Cromer himself wrote to Kitchener following his victory at Omdurman, ‘for many years those who have been in any degree responsible for the management of Egyptian affairs have kept prominently before their eyes the desirability of accomplishing two main objects. One of these was to reoccupy Khartoum, the other was to store the waters of the Nile.’¹⁴⁶ Indeed, there was an assumption amongst some foreign commentators that

¹⁴³ Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, 160.

¹⁴⁵ Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ The National Archives, Kew, PRO 30/57/14/13, Letter from Lord Cromer to Herbert Kitchener, 20 June 1899.

British control would inevitably be extended up the Nile to the Great Lakes following the victory at Omdurman.¹⁴⁷

As influential as Cromer was, however, he was not the final arbiter of the decision to retake Sudan, a decision which had been deeply-rooted in a much larger context of British naval policy and the imperial world system. Similarly, another argument put forward by the imperial historian Robert Hyam that the confrontation between Britain and France over Fashoda following the Battle of Omdurman was driven by considerations of prestige and status between London and Paris overlooks Britain's long-vested strategic interests in the region.¹⁴⁸ Hyam's observations about the diplomatic clash between Britain and France over southern Sudan are insightful, but given Britain's strategic presence in Sudan dating back to 1884, it seems unlikely that imperial defence interests played no role in Britain's refusal to accommodate a French military presence between Sudan and Uganda.

Conclusion

In every case, British territorial expansion in northeastern Africa was driven by a combination of factors, and concerns over imperial defence played only a partial role in persuading government officials and private entrepreneurs to expend treasure and political capital in order to extend British rule over the African interior. The strategic factor was most obviously demonstrated by the annexation of Somaliland following the second Suakin expedition in order to prevent Zeyla and Berbera from falling into French or Italian hands.

Although William Mackinnon's financial investment in East Africa has been one of the most frequently cited reasons for the formation of the IBEAC and the subsequent annexation of Kenya, he too was clearly concerned about the defence of the Empire. During his abortive run for Parliament in

¹⁴⁷ 'Egypt After Omdurman,' *The New York Times*, 9 July 1899.

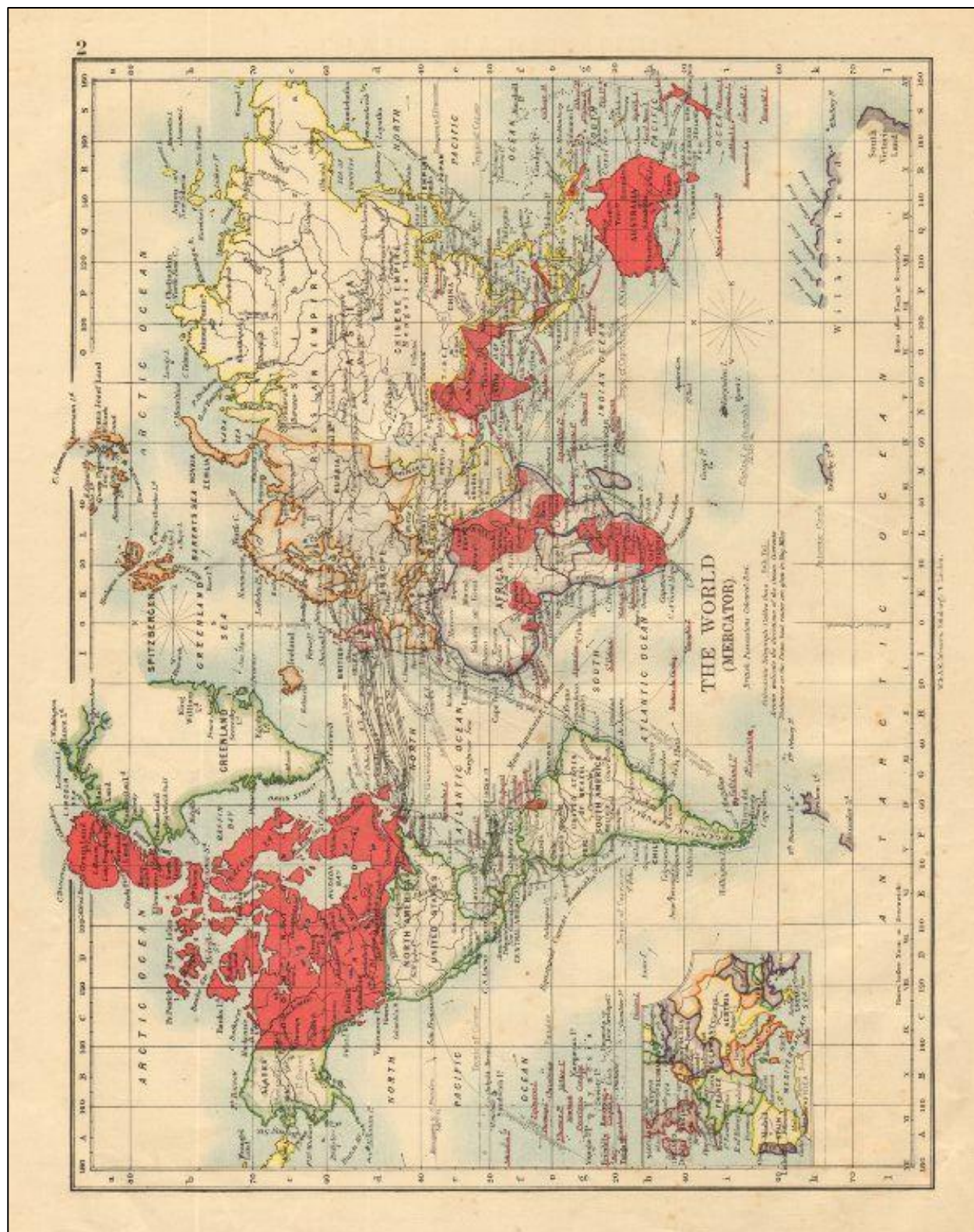
¹⁴⁸ Robert Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 230.

1885, he himself expressed support for the idea of imperial federation and the annexation of Egypt in the name of imperial security. Moreover, as a shipping magnate with close connections to John Pender, he was naturally well-informed about the potential of the steamship and the telegraph to bind the Empire into a single strategic unit. The trappings of the IBEAC when it was established symbolised its dual purpose as a vehicle for private profit as well as British imperial power.

Furthermore, though the invasion of Sudan had been long-planned, the final catalyst for the attack was the risk of Italian collapse following the Battle of Adowa, which threatened to undermine the Mediterranean naval alliance against France and Russia as Italy's presence as a counterbalance in the Horn of Africa. Cromer's determination to safeguard Egypt's water supply and the revival of Egypt's longstanding claims to Sudan may have contributed to the decision, but the root cause of Britain's interest in Sudan seems undeniably to be founded in Egypt's position between the Red and Mediterranean seas.

Figure 9: Extent of the British Empire, c. 1900

W. & A.K. Johnston. *The World (Mercator)* [map]. Scale not given, W. & A.K. Johnston *The World-Wide Atlas of Modern Geography*, vol. 5. 1900.



Conclusion

Research Problem

The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have been largely overlooked by historians, who have traditionally focused on the civilisations and societies of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The harsh climate in the Red Sea region precluded the emergence of large, permanent settlements and the difficulties in navigating through it led European navigators and historians to disregard the sea's significance. This is reflected in the dearth of scholarship on the waterway, which remains a minority interest amongst historians. What scholarship does exist has only partially examined the nineteenth-century history of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, arguably one of its most important periods. As this thesis has shown, the roots of European imperialism in the region stretch back to the Napoleonic Wars, far pre-dating the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

No full-scale study of the largest of these empires during the heyday of imperialism has previously been undertaken. The current scholarship on the British Empire in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has seriously undervalued the regional context and the relationship between different imperial territories along the coastline. Traditionally, the colonies and protectorates acquired by the British Empire in northeastern Africa and southern Arabia have been viewed as disparate units, separated by the waters between them and each studied as isolated cases of colonialism. Perhaps as a consequence of Western geographic bias, Egypt and Sudan have been viewed as one unit, whilst Somaliland, Kenya, and Yemen, and the islands in between them, are typically studied by historians of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, respectively. Divided into categories based on traditional distinctions between North Africa, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa, no single explanation has been offered as to why these territories were conquered by the British and why these acquisitions occurred roughly the same decades.

Similarly, the existing literature on European imperialism in Africa more generally has also neglected to study the Red Sea region in much detail. Whilst the Scramble for Africa and its affects in other areas of the continent have been thoroughly examined, less attention has been paid to the Red Sea and northeastern Africa. This may be a reflection of the fact that the conflicts and diplomatic quarrels over the littoral zone, viewed in the wider context of war and diplomacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were relatively minor. True, the Anglo-Sudanese wars have been studied and celebrated by generations of British historians, albeit mostly from a Middle Eastern and Egypt-centric perspective, and the Battle of Adowa remains an event of immense symbolic importance in present-day Ethiopia and the Ethiopian diaspora. But events such as the Suakin expeditions, the French annexation of the Gulf of Tadjoura, and the occupation of small islands in the Gulf of Aden have largely been forgotten by both academe as well as the general public. Seized in order to prevent any other power from capturing them, territories such as the Eastern Sudan and Somaliland were and have remained on the fringes of imperial memory.

In the absence of major wars, notable diplomatic crises, or large sources of mineral wealth, the Red Sea region has languished largely as an overlooked corner of Africa, despite being profoundly affected by the colonial scramble. This region is the true crossroads between Europe, Africa, and Asia, and the expansion of the British Empire into the territories surrounding the Red Sea cannot be viewed as a series of isolated cases. The aim of this study has been to uncover what common threads linked the establishment of British rule over Sudan, Yemen, Somaliland, Kenya and the islands in between. The deep reluctance of successive nineteenth century British governments to expend money and lives in acquiring new territories contrasted sharply with the poverty and desolation of Perim and the Sudanese and Somali deserts. Without offering any significant economic opportunities, it is important to identify what qualities these territories possessed to persuade parsimonious British policymakers to extend imperial control over them.

Summary of Findings

The answer to this question was found largely in the archives of the government departments responsible for crafting British grand strategy during the Victorian period. What emerges from the data is a preoccupation with maintaining the Royal Navy's supremacy in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as a critical link in the global system. Depending on the circumstances, naval supremacy could be temporary or permanent, relative or absolute. But as British strategy evolved over the course of the later nineteenth century in response to relative national decline, so did the commitment of naval and military resources to the Red Sea. The link connecting the capture of territories surrounding the sea and the Gulf of Aden was the need to ensure that no foreign rival could dominate the waterway, a goal which remained constant throughout century and which drove the expansion of imperial control from the coast inland.

It is for this reason that Britain's first significant political involvement in the Red Sea occurred during the Napoleonic Wars. Once French armies had been disgorged into Egypt and established a foothold at the northern end of the Red Sea, Bonaparte could threaten the British position India by transporting his troops south through the Red Sea to the subcontinent. In response, the Royal Navy created a temporary squadron to cruise the Red Sea and challenge any French plans to use the waterway as a highway to India, British domination over which was contested by powerful French-allied local actors. The attempted landing at Perim Island in 1799 is therefore hugely significant as it represented the first British effort to acquire territory in the region, and was done so expressly for the purpose of maintaining the navy's control over the sea. Although ultimately a failure, the Perim expedition marks the beginning of British imperialism in the Red Sea region.

After the cessation of the French threat following Waterloo, British government interest in the Red Sea lapsed. This lapse in interest again reinforces the point that territory in the region was only valuable in so far as it could offer military or naval advantage to European powers with interests

in the Indian Ocean and beyond. With a base at Aden and reassurance that Socotra was useless as a naval station, by the 1840s London had lost much of its interest in the sea.

However, the government did support efforts to link India with the Mediterranean through the Red Sea with steamships and undersea cables, recognising that faster communication with India would be advantageous for British interests in the subcontinent. But these efforts, including the subsidisation financing of John Pender's Anglo-Indian cable and the construction of lighthouses, were limited largely to commercial subsidies. In the absence of any threats to the communication link, there was no need to extend political control over territory in the region – unless to pre-empt a rival (as the formal annexation of Perim in 1857 demonstrated). These investments added to the value of the region to Britain's imperial interests and emphasised Britain's indirect dominance of the waterway.

This laissez-faire attitude towards the Red Sea was a rational means of upholding British global interests at minimum cost. Offering no significant commercial advantage, the arid territories of the region could be left unexplored and unclaimed and scant resources shifted elsewhere. However, growing realisation that Britain was becoming dependent on the Empire to support its claim to be a Great Power and increasing investment in undersea cables and steamship routes to link together the far-flung colonies to the metropole ensured that waterways such as the Red Sea came to feature ever higher on Britain's strategic priorities. The US Civil War and the Russian advance into central Asia underscored British weakness, even as the obsolete ramparts of Fortress England continued to be constructed.

Beginning in the 1870s and the 1880s, the prophets of Greater Britain, Froude and Seeley, hailed an imperial federation as the means of averting eclipse while Colomb spelled out the means of doing so. Guided by the promise that protecting the veins in the imperial body politic would re-establish the British Empire as an integrated, militarily-powerful and economically self-sufficient polity, policymakers in London once again turned their attention to the geographic choke points

through which these red routes ran, including the Red Sea. To foster imperial integration, it was vital that British steamships should be able to travel along unbroken chains of coaling stations to ports and telegraphic messages to flow along undersea cables studded with naval fortresses.

Whilst the Red Sea had previously been left to the preserve of the P&O's packet steamer service and periodic Royal Navy anti-slavery patrols, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 threatened to jeopardise the Mediterranean link with the Indian Ocean. French claims to portions (and in Egypt's case, the entirety) of the coastline of northeastern Africa provoked consternation in London until it was realised that Egypt's claims would prove a useful tool for blocking French access to the deep-water ports capable of supporting cruiser squadrons. The Egyptian colonial empire therefore became a tool of indirect British control, guaranteeing that more serious rivals would be unable to challenge the Royal Navy's pre-dominant position in Red Sea, which was anchored in Aden. Better the malleable Egyptians shoulder the costs of governing Suakin, Massawa, Zeyla and Berbera rather than the Treasury.

The subsequent collapse of the Egyptian colonial empire in the 1880s was therefore a turning point as it opened up vast territories to the Mahdists and the Ethiopians, while France and Italy were eager to stake naval footholds in the Red Sea and the Gulf. Compelled by the relentless logic of imperial defence, Liberals and Conservatives alike were persuaded into assuming responsibility for significant sections of coastal territory in Sudan and Somaliland. The threat of French advances and Italian defeats in the latter half of the decade and in the 1890s ensured that these assumptions of responsibility ultimately became formal annexations. Pushed by William Mackinnon's personal and business crusade into East Africa, by 1899 (the proclamation of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), Queen Victoria reigned over a belt of territory from Alexandria to Mombasa, including the entirety of the River Nile and all the major ports of the northeastern coast. By contrast, France and Italy were left with a handful of modest holdings guaranteed never to pose any significant threat to the imperial artery in the Red Sea.

Contribution to Understanding

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden must be viewed as a single oceanic region, which requires a shift in perception away from a land-focused view of Empire to a sea-borne one. The inherent power of the British Empire during its nineteenth century heyday was not so much in the square miles of territory under control, but the ability to dominate international trade and communications, most of which was ocean-based. The territories which were assimilated into the Empire discussed over the course of this dissertation must therefore be considered parts of a single region united by the waters of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The British imperium was based in the waterway itself, and the land-based conquests were security cordons for British naval power centred in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden proper.

Given that British power was primarily sea-based and ocean-focused, this oceanic perspective is perhaps a more accurate means of examining late Victorian imperialism. The evidence uncovered during the course of this study demonstrates that concerns over shipping and communication were the primary drivers behind imperial expansion into northeastern Africa. Whilst previous examinations of British involvement in the Red Sea region have presented the history of each territorial conquest in isolation, this study has demonstrated that the acquisition of holdings in Sudan, Somaliland, East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula were in fact part of a single unified phenomenon. Although ostensibly carried out in different continents by different branches of government, the conquest of these territories was motivated by the same considerations.

Moreover, whilst it is true that previous historians have noted the willingness of the British government to annex territory in the region to safeguard the imperial shipping route to India, these arguments have suffered from two notable defects. Firstly, whilst Robinson and Gallagher correctly noted that Britain's willingness to occupy Egypt in 1882 was motivated in part by the need to secure the Suez Canal, and Sudan in the 1890s to secure the Nile, they did not extend their analysis to the territories bordering on the Red Sea.

Secondly, to argue that British expansion was conducted to protect the Anglo-Indian shipping route is to miss the wider context of imperial defence and communication. The Red Sea was not merely a convenient shipping route between Britain and Bombay, rather it was the central spinal column and nervous system through which most British shipping and (even more importantly) communications flowed between Britain and the entirety of the eastern Empire. Indeed, until work began on laying cables from Britain to South Africa *via* the Atlantic, and Britain to Australia *via* Vancouver and the Pacific in 1899, the only telegraphic connections between London and the entire eastern Empire ran through the Red Sea. Advances in communication technology as well as the steamship provided British strategists with an apparent answer to the challenge posed by the rising continental economic and protectionist powers, the US, Germany and Russia, and this depended on control over the Red Sea. Far from being a campaign to prevent the interdiction of ships bound for India, the navy's extensive deployment in the sea and the Gulf and the assimilation of territories along their coasts was part of a wider effort to maintain Britain's standing as a world power. In the era of Social Darwinism imperial defence was couched in terms of national survival, and the campaigns in the Red Sea region must be viewed within the context of decline.

Finally, these findings provide a coherent explanation as to why the territories were acquired and at particular times. Perim and Aden were effectively the result of the British naval campaign in the Red Sea during the Napoleonic Wars, identified as potential bases by the navy and seized when circumstances dictated. Eastern Sudan and Somaliland were taken in response to the collapse of the Egyptian colonial empire and the advance of French and Italian naval forces into the region. Similarly, Mombasa was annexed as a base when it appeared that Germany was threatening to challenge local British maritime and communications dominance along the coast of East Africa.

Viewed separately, the acquisition of individual territories appears to defy any set pattern or consistent theme. However, when viewed from the perspective of imperial defence, the expansion

of the Empire clearly took place as a reaction to perceived naval threats and in the most economical manner of doing so.

Further Research

Although beyond the scope of this project, a closer examination of French and Italian intentions in the Red Sea promises to lead to a more accurate assessment of the strategic situation in the region. Whilst British policymakers grew concerned about the French colony at Obokh and were suspicious of French intentions towards other ports in the region, it is not clear how well-founded these fears were. The French may have hoped to use Obokh as a coaling station, but whether the station was intended to be a naval facility remains uncertain. Without access to archival materials from the Ministry of Marine in Paris, it is impossible to state with any certainty whether French military thinkers actively sought to challenge British naval mastery of the sea.

Similarly, Italian and Belgian intentions merit further research. Although Italy was used as a convenient placeholder by the British in Massawa and, like Obokh, the Italian colony at Assab was deemed to pose no threat, Italian aims in the region remain unconfirmed. Statements given by leading Italian officials suggest that Rome was eager to amplify its international standing by acquiring colonies in strategically-useful places, but Italy's military aims cannot be assessed without further research into the Italian archives.

In regard to Belgian intentions, Leopold II remains a fascinating and elusive figure on the fringes of this study. His conversations with Gordon and Gordon's private admissions to friends point towards a goal of annexing Sudan to the Congo Free State, and given Leopold's character and hunger for colonial territory, this conclusion appears credible. Whether Gordon would have consented to combining Sudan and Congo into a single dominion under the Belgian crown remains an open question. Unfortunately, the destruction of the Congo Free State archives on Leopold's orders after

responsibility for the colony was assumed by the Belgian state makes further advances into this area of research particularly challenging. Nevertheless, this avenue of research may potentially yield further insights into the establishment of Leopold's Congo colony. Given the quiet yet overwhelming presence of the Congo Free State on the fringes of the Red Sea region, research in this direction will likely shed greater light on the Great Power rivalries which fundamentally shaped the historical development of Africa during the Age of Imperialism.

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